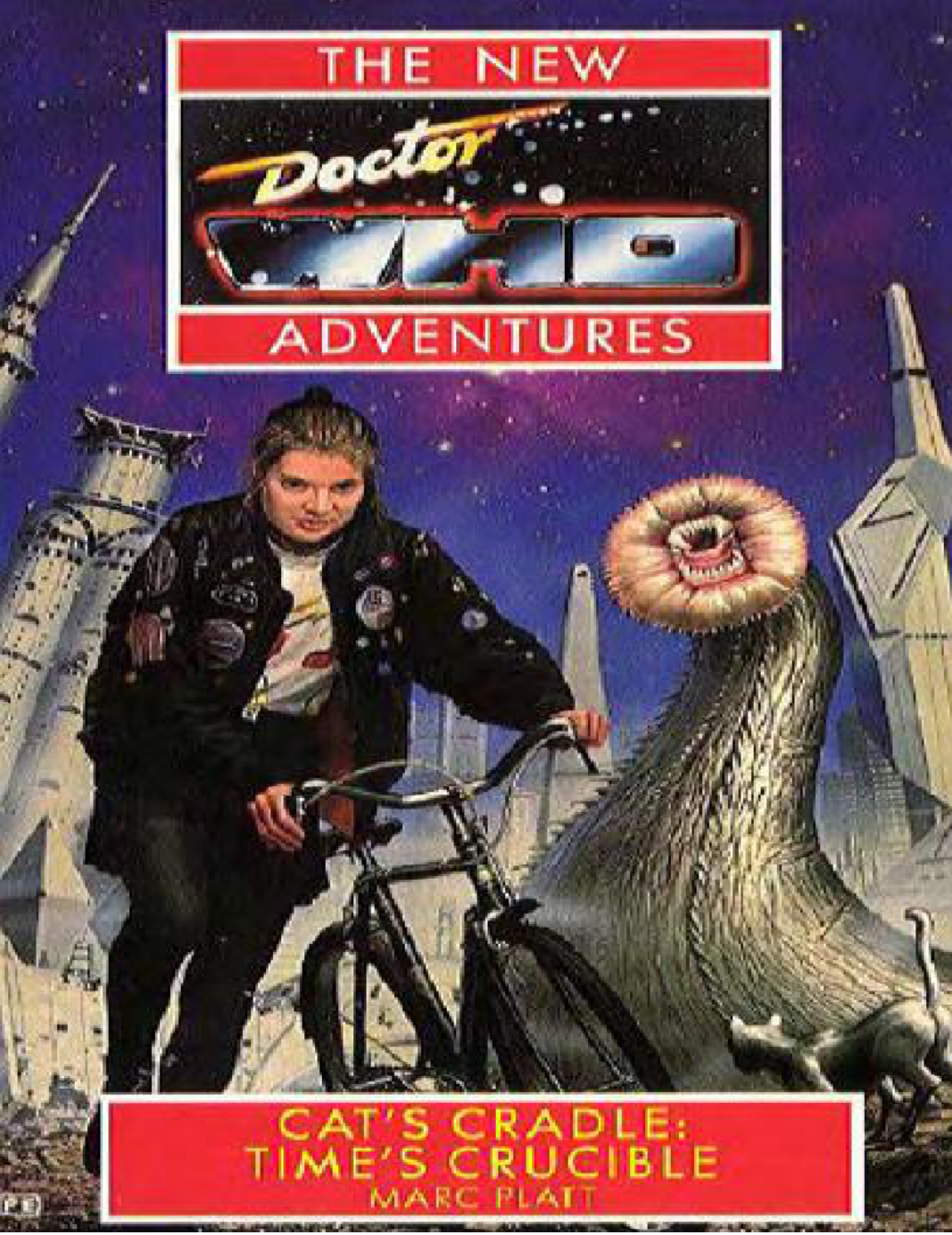
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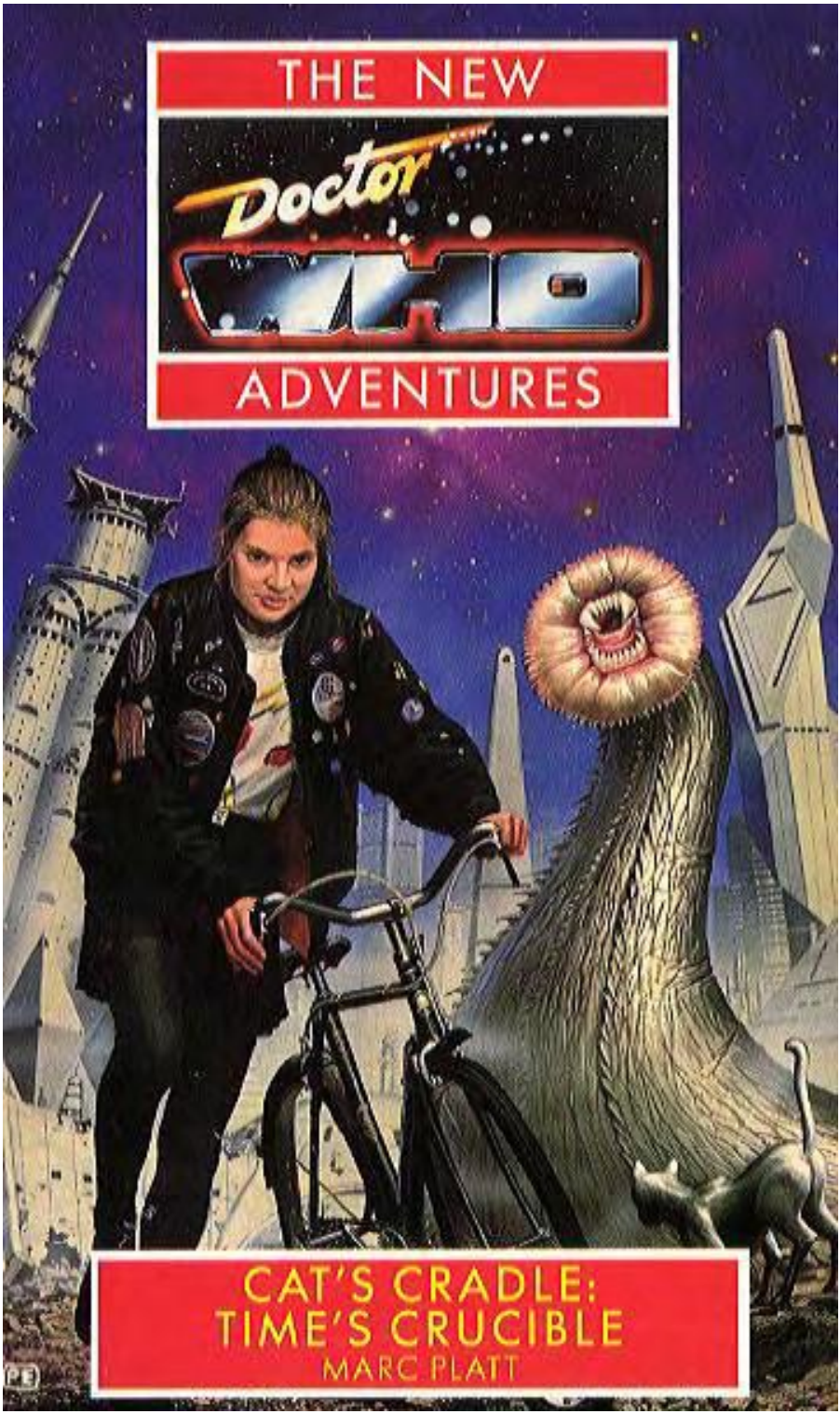
MARC PLATT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field *from the same season.* ***Cat's Cradle: Time's Crucible*** *is the first adventure in the three-volume Cat's Cradle series.*

CAT'S CRADLE: TIME'S CRUCIBLE

Marc Platt

First published in 1992 by Doctor Who Books an imprint of Virgin Publishing Ltd

338 Ladbroke Grove

London W10 5AH

For Andrew and Kate

and their pale cat

My thanks to a whole cradleful of people who helped pull the strings:

Ben Aaronovitch, Robert Allsopp, Ian Briggs, Jon Cox, Terrance Dicks, Ian and Margaret and Alice Mackenzie-Sherrin, Sue Moore, Gary Russell, Mike Tucker, Beth Finch and Tony McTurk and Salsa and Tumpy

Cradles for cats

Are string and air

If you let go

There's nothing there.

But if we are neat

And nimble and clever

Pussy-cat's cradle will

Go on for ever.

Myfanwy Piper

the libretto to Britten's opera

The Turn of the Screw

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Prologue

The Doctor dropped a slice of stale bread into a battered electric toaster and pondered what to do next. He paused for a moment. The gentle hum of his TARDIS was

disconcertingly soothing.

He had recently noticed a tiny rattle in the time machine's drive units. Something had probably worked loose during aeons of travels in the ship and he had already grown used to it. But now that the fault had suddenly stopped, its absence worried him.

Traversing time as he did, back and forth across centuries of space, rendered the dimension almost meaningless. The Doctor had only occasionally remembered that things needed replacing or servicing, or they wore out completely. Even within the TARDIS, time still took its toll.

But he had things to do. He hurriedly reminded himself of the world where he had been born. Gallifrey: the dark, baroque auditorium where silent ranks of centuries-old Time Lords were half-lit by the play of the Universe they so passively observed. All that potential wasted. The most powerful civilization in the cosmos would have been better off staying in the Dark Time; the time of Chaos and superstition. That was why he left. He couldn't just sit there.

That image was always enough to strike out thoughts of such ponderous domestic tasks as repairs. Time was of the essence.

There were still countless races and cultures to sample; other people's problems that needed sorting out; battles to be fought or avoided; heroes and companions who needed rescuing; ruffled water that threw back a thousand reflections of a single ruby-red sun.

He might debate philosophy with the wisest minds in the Universe, or construct a pair of workable wings from his collection of quill pens.

The Doctor decided not to worry. He convinced himself that the TARDIS's rattle had simple righted itself in the general course of events. Satisfied, he allowed himself a glow of appreciation for his trusty ship, but not for too long —

he was busy.

"Professor!" The latest companion burst through the galley door and descended upon him waving her arms through wreaths of smoke.

"You've done it again!" shouted Ace.

The Doctor looked and saw that his toast was burning. A snatch of rhyme began to tumble annoyingly around his head:

For Tweedledum said Tweedledee

Had spoiled his nice new rattle.

He pondered on its peculiar significance and reached for a fire extinguisher.

1: Moussaka and Chips

Vael Voryunsti Sheverell was not cut out to be a Young Hero. At the Academia, he played truant from lectures as often as possible. Other Young Hero cadets gathered in the watery sunlight on the ancient caution steps that surrounded the learning halls, debating philosophy and strategy with their sandaled tutors. Vael studied Time theory alone.

He could spend days by himself, only leaving his books to stare from his tiny barrack room window at the wine-dark sky over the city. He would listen to the tales of the traders in the merchant port and space harbour below; strange-featured people who thought in strange accents as they bartered the wares of every exotic corner of the Gallifreyan Empire. They always bragged tales of the latest exploits of

the Heroes on the widening frontiers. Hunting the lacustrine Sattisar and battling with the Gryffnae, whose great stone heads were studded with jewels. They brought news of the century-long siege of the Winter Star and a plague of batworms on the asteroid archipelago.

But Vael did not want to mingle with these ruffians. He wanted only to listen and watch from a distance, just as he observed and watched his fellow cadets and was despised for it. He attended academic parades only on pain of expulsion, guessing that the Court of Principals would never carry out such a threat for they knew that he was an Individual.

This was no guess, he had been as good as told it. He had once seen his tutor speaking in the market with the aged and venerable Pythia from the city temples. The tutor's face was turning crimson as he tried not to choke, for the old priestess's blue, fur-trimmed robes reeked of the woodsmoke and incense in which she was bathed when she consulted the past and future. She leaned from her palanquin and singled Vael out across the busy plaza, remarking on his thick mop of red-gold hair: the sure sign of an Individual. He would have made a good pilot, but he was too old for that now.

He was certain she had meant him to hear, for she glanced directly at him as she spoke, but he blocked his own thoughts when he felt the pressure of her enquiring mind.

She did not appear surprised; she simply grunted, her suspicions confirmed, and ordered her transport on.

After that, the Court of Principals seemed more tolerant of Vael's misdemeanours. The warning reports to his home ceased and the letters he sent back dwindled to perhaps one a season. During all his time in the City, he had been relieved to be five hundred leagues from family ties and prying thoughts. He ignored his parents' show of concern for him, knowing that his welfare was secondary to family reputation. Their concern was confined to letters. They never visited him. Their merchant estate in the distant Soonwell Valley was expanding and his elder sisters were both partners with children of their own.

Vael loathed the cadets' arduous training, especially the physical endurance courses. Sports, swordplay and military manoeuvres bored him, so he exercised his mind in creating new excuses which would exempt him from attending lectures and practicals. This should have counted against him, but he had learned how far he could play on a

tutor's tolerance and still get what he wanted. His capacity to remember things that children forget when they become adults did not desert him. Above all, his ability to shield his mind against the greatest curse of the Gallifreyan civilization marked him out as an individual among Individuals.

In the old days, before the Intuitive Revelation, secrets were a precious gift on Gallifrey. For most of the population, cursed with the relentless mental fog of telepathy, secrets were an unfathomable mystery. No idea or notion was yours alone. The air ceaselessly droned with the commentary of public opinion; the thoughts of the people's minds invaded each other's heads in an unending chorus of unharmony, before passing into the great pool of collective existence that made up the root of Gallifreyan culture. Some cadets could be taught to shut out the endless babble; to others the shutting out came naturally. Yet those who succeeded faced the greatest horror of all for a Gallifreyan: the terrible isolation of silence. Only those who endured this fate would rise from the plebeian masses as Individuals with all the makings of a Young Hero.

It was at the time of the return of the mighty Hero Prydonius from his greatest voyage that Vael failed his final assessments. When he saw the posted results, he just shrugged and headed back through the gathering crowds for the privacy of his solitary barrack room.

Winter was biting at the City early, freezing the mud on the streets that were unheated - and that year many more streets were cold than before. The dreary summers of recent times seemed havens of warmth in comparison. A bitter wind from the Northern Lakes scythed through the dingy corridors. Steam rose in carved clouds from the food stalls in the market.

The sharpened air buzzed with the thoughts of the people as the crowds choked those streets that were heated, rejoicing in the Hero's return. The whisper was that one of the Future Legends had been fulfilled.

Vael blocked his mind from the rumours, but there was no escape: the media were equally full of Prydonius's triumphant homecoming. Live coverage on all channels as the Hero's ship, the *Apollaten* docked in the flight harbour, its space-corralled prow nudging into the icy anchor gantries.

On the quays, the cheering crowds were already working themselves into a frenzy.

Vael heard a knock on the door. He knew it would be Loie, the cadet in the next room. The only one who bothered to talk to him, even though he despised her. Loie would have seen the results as well, but Vael could exist without her sympathy. He resisted making a fierce retaliation to the enquiring thoughts that came through the door. Instead, he shut himself off from her persistent knocking and thought no giveaway thoughts at all.

On the screen there were in-depth interviews with Prydonius and his crew, relating their quest into the blood-red mists of distant Thule, where they had overthrown the reign of a marauding Sphinx. There were visual reports from the documentary team that had accompanied the voyage, but despite the euphoria, all the interviewers pressed home two questions: was this the last of the epic space journeys?

And did the new experiments into time travel number the days of the Space Voyager?

Haclav Agusti Prydonius, the Hero and seasoned interviewee, shook his mane of black hair and laughed out loud. "I'm no lackey of Rassilon and his neo-technologists.

There'll be no substitute for the Old Order." To affirm this he produced his greatest trophy, retrieved from the ruin of Thule

- the severed head of the Sphinx itself. Preserved temprogenically, it would be donated to the Academia Library for study. Perhaps, Prydonius added mockingly, it would be persuaded to divulge the answers to some of its riddles.

Vael switched off the screen in disgust and wrapped himself in a fury he was unaware he harboured.

He knew he was special - even appointed for some future he could not yet see. He would not be next to nothing; not sink back into the faceless chorus of the people. He railed at the injustice of the Gods, the capricious and all-powerful Menti Celesti, who saw all things but did nothing!

Shaking, he reeled round and fell back in tenor at the implacable figure that stood over him.

The Pythia, her masklike face streaked with gold and her long grey ringlets coiled with silver wire. She was a cold statue, but Vael caught the woodsmoke smell and saw the talismans that hung from her robes, glinting with the trapped starlight of long-lost constellations.

The only thought Vael heard, and was unable to block out, was " *How wasteful!* " The silent look that it accompanied was of downright contempt for his failure. In a rage that forgot the deference due to a priestess so venerable, Vael thrust back a defiant curse on all the ritual and lore of Gallifrey. "Your days are numbered. Superstition will be swept away in the new Age of Reason."

The Pythia's gilded eyes narrowed for a moment and her bony hand clutched at the sceptre head of the wand on which she leaned. In that instant, Vael felt her search into his mind as clearly as the star glass through which she saw other ancient Pythias in other worlds and times. He thought to feign dutiful shame, but what was the point? By now the priestess understood that he was special too.

For long moments outside the natural ebb of thought, he was held speechless by her scrutiny. Then her eyes, unnaturally black like the void, released him. He was dismissed. A torrent of thoughts flooded his unshielded mind: the carnival of Prydonius's victory parade through the snowy city. The cacophony of Gallifreyan minds was for once unified into a single harmonized and joyous chorus of triumph.

" *Like the radiant sun in the sky, supreme in glory, so Prydonius, our greatest hero, returns in glory to Gallifrey*"

Vael fell back unconscious.

He clung to the sides of his sleeping-pallet as the stars whirlpooled above him. He was the centre point on which the reckless universe spun. Silhouetted figures darted across the blaze of coloured gas clouds and white meteors traced a web of paths against the radiance. Against the spinning vortex a head leaned in over him, upside down like an examining physician.

"So that's the dream!" Vael yelled aloud.

From light aeons past came the angry roar of the pitiless Sphinx. Vael cried out in fear at a bent figure, cowled in darkness, that reached out a skeletal hand to him for help.

The hood of shadow slid back to reveal the wizened face. An old man imploring the brash youth he had once been to think again and change the ordained future. In the dream half-light, Vael knew himself.

Through the dark iridescence of the cosmos came the distant flicker of a star. As it approached, Vael saw that its light had a regular pulse. It

crowned a hard oblong that tumbled towards him out of the maelstrom. The shape's blue-panelled surfaces snatched at the primal glare of starlight as they spun. Vael willed it to stop, but there was no escape. How could he control his dreaming? How did he know that the unreadable runes on its sides read "Police Public Call Box"? It tumbled nearer. It would crush him.

"This one's on me," said Ace across the café table.

The Doctor smiled gratefully at his young companion and stopped fishing through his moneyless pockets. He sat back and contemplated the dog-eared menu. "Baked Alaska," he said.

"Yeah." She draped her battered black jacket with all the badges on the back on the chair.

The Doctor was intrigued. "Frozen in the middle, but hot on the outside?"

"Ice cream and hot meringue."

"Fascinating. I've never been to Alaska. All right, I'll have one."

"As long as you eat it as well as analyse it!"

He wasn't sure about that, but agreed to keep Ace happy. "And a glass of water too, please," he added and sat back contented.

Ace wished he would take his hat off. He seemed to have been wearing the same jacket and paisley scarf for at least the past month relative time, but they never looked any worse for wear.

The traffic on Ealing Broadway was busy for Sunday — if it was still Sunday. Ace couldn't remember a night in between that could have led to Monday. The amount of planet-hopping that she and the Doctor had clocked up lately should have made jet lag feel like a mild headache. It didn't, because, she suspected, the TARDIS somehow compensated. She reckoned the Doctor's time machine had idiosyncrasies like that. Even moods, like its owner.

But she and the Doctor needed a decent meal, not a foil-wrapped jumble of flavoured nutrient bars dished out from the TARDIS lunch machine. Ace had instinctively renamed the ship's food dispenser in revenge for the Doctor's persistent use of pseudo-jargon and alien folklore, stuff she had to pretend to understand. The trouble was he was usually serious about it, and it was difficult to sneer at something

improbably called the "Hand of Omega", when the next minute it was coming after you for its lunch.

Lunch. Where she had started.

Since Perivale was dead as a dodo, or a *didus ineptus* as the Doctor called it, they had checked that the TARDIS

was still parked on the corner of a leafy housing estate and caught the bus to Ealing.

It was only three years since she had left, yet some familiar shops on the Broadway had already been replaced by newer, blander commodity outlets. The Doctor eyed the window displays of manikins in the department stores with a mixture of curiosity and what looked like suspicion.

"Never be certain of what you think you see," he muttered. He was in one of his quiet moods, the quiet before another storm of activity, so Ace steered him into the first café they came to while she still had the chance.

She recognized the bored waitress who eventually sidled over as a girl from a year below her at school. Debbie Whatever her name was didn't recognize Ace at all. She wrote down the order for one moussaka and chips, one baked Alaska, one glass of water and one glass of milk as if she was on automatic pilot. You'd probably get more sense out of Captain Lunchbox in the TARDIS.

The Doctor was starting to fidget with his cutlery. Ace watched him, wondering why he suddenly looked so out of place. He normally slotted naturally into any situation, however bizarre, from alien ice cave to Victorian dinner party.

Was it because twentieth-century suburban London was her territory and elsewhere in the galaxy they were both alien?

She looked across the café at a painting by the fire exit.

Against a parched background of craggy rocks and broken trees, three grey swans were swimming on a mirror-surfaced lake. But in the water, the reflections of the swans appeared as elephants. Well weird.

Ace froze. A large marmalade tom cat had just walked in from the back of the café. It stopped and surveyed the occupants of the café as barely tolerated intruders in its territory. Eventually, its amber eyes

settled on Ace and stared with an unnerving impassiveness that made the girl want to run. Her aversion to cats, especially black ones, had only recently developed. It wasn't an allergy, they just brought out the worst in her; feelings she didn't talk about. The tom walked casually between the tables with the sort of mooching purposefulness that set Ace's teeth on edge. She braced herself for something terrible.

The Doctor was contemplating the traffic outside.

"Nothing to worry about," he said quietly without looking at her.

"What?"

"Just an ordinary cat. No need to get so jumpy."

When Ace looked again, the cat had gone. "Back into the kitchen. Probably his dinnertime too," said the Doctor, but he was still watching the traffic.

How could he know that without looking? Irritated, Ace pretended to study the picture again, but she secretly watched him from the corner of her eye. Her friend, the Doctor. Outwardly a clownish eccentric, a genius in human terms, but that was just the bit you were allowed to see. An alien with a Scottish accent. Travelling through time and space with him, Ace had had the chance to look closer, and through the occasional cracks in his veneer, she glimpsed a darker, huger intellect. It seemed very alien, detached and powerful, as if the Doctor was just something the intellect went about in. Or was it just her imagination?

Never be certain of what you think you see.

Sometimes the darkness seeped from the cracks and those it touched might get hurt. Ace had learned from her own bruises that no one who met the Doctor was left unchanged. Yet he was kind, compassionate, spiky and often angry; vulnerable to all mortal foibles. But that might be deliberate. He embraced them eagerly as if they were toys.

Lingering on one world or another, as if to play them out or test their capacity. He was just as dangerous as the evil he attracted and opposed. So what if he did have eyes in the back of his head, had appalling taste in clothes and careered around the universe in a time machine shaped like a police box? If he said it could change shape, she believed him. He was twenty-five out of ten to be with. She prayed her time with him would never, ever end.

She caught a flash of light in the window and realized that the Doctor had been watching the reflection in the glass.

Debbie Whatsit was delivering food to the family of three at the next table.

It was half-past five on a Sunday afternoon in July. So why was the dusk gathering outside? The sky, which had been a Hollywood blue, was turning a lurid orange. The passers-by on Ealing Broadway seemed to be going through fits and starts of slow motion. "Professor...?" said Ace to the Doctor, but he shushed her into silence.

Turning round, he pulled a silly face at the little girl, an angelic toddler of no more than two, seated in a high chair at the next table. She played her spoon into a bowl of ice cream while her parents fussed indulgently, their skin flickering the dead colour of mushroom soup. The clock above the kitchen door slowly slid down the wall, over the pelmet and dripped to the floor.

"Professor . . . Doctor, what's happening?"

The Doctor put his hand up to the side of his head as if he was in pain. He had turned very pale. The little girl looked up at him. "Hello Alice," he whispered, "you have lovely eyes."

Around them, the perspective of the walls started to shift; closer here, then farther, until Ace could see through their opaque framework into the juddering reality outside. She clung to the sides of her chair tightly.

"Baked Alaska?" asked Debbie, walking with their order across the shifting tiles of the floor.

Alice's eyes were the colour of the stolen sky, framed by the fiery red gold of her hair. She gazed enquiringly at the Doctor.

He shook his head in despair. "I don't know," he said.

"You tell me what happens next."

The little girl turned her head and looked out of the window. "Pusscat," she said, "miaow, miaow."

They followed her gaze. A cat was sitting on the ruptured pavement outside, staring intently in at them. It wasn't a kitten; it was a very small, perfectly proportioned, adult cat and its coat was shimmering

silver.

"D'you want this or not?" said Debbie. The moussaka, half-congealed on the plate, opened out like a rose. Within its milk-white petals was a heart of fire.

The Doctor tipped forward on to the table with a moan of pain. Unable to use the disintegrating floor to reach him, Ace clambered over the table. The cutlery and condiments scuttled to get out of her way. She cradled and clung to the trembling Doctor.

"Is he all right?" said Alice's father, getting up from his place.

"You should call an ambulance," said Alice's mother.

Debbie turned and ran for the kitchen.

The Doctor stared out of the window at the cat. "What does it want?" whispered Ace. "What's happening?"

The sky pulsed balefully like a beacon with light that came from the north and Perivale. A 207 bus sped past, its windows reflecting a barren desert. The whole concept and existence of Ealing Broadway was beginning to curl at the edges. "The TARDIS . . ." choked the Doctor.

The cat rose and trotted up the street out of view.

With a sudden burst of energy, the Doctor pulled himself free of Ace. Sending his chair clattering away, he staggered towards the door. The walls of the café began to resolve again, blotting out the abyss of clouds beyond them.

Ace was hurrying after the Doctor, but a shout from Debbie called her back. "Here," she snapped. She slammed a plastic bag of twenty-pence winnings from a pub fruit machine down on the table.

"Oi!" shouted Debbie as Ace disappeared onto the Broadway. "You didn't even eat it." She looked at the baked Alaska, already melting in the afternoon sunshine.

"Weirdies," agreed Alice's parents.

"Bye bye, pusscat," said Alice and got on with stirring her ice cream.

2: Cat's Eyes

Vael awoke in a cold sweating fever. The chanting from the streets was still pounding into his mind. The Pythia was gone with the fading nightmare, but the smell of woodsmoke still clung to his dingy room. He ran his clammy hands over his face and through his red-gold hair, vainly trying to shut out the rabble's thoughts; he needed the privacy of his own head, but the cheering for the returned Hero mocked at Vael's failure and lost powers.

Pushing his way on to the icy streets, he was jostled along on the tide of the celebrating throng. It was easier to drift with them. The icon banners, the drone of the pianalaika bands, like the voice of the relentless frost. Where he went did not matter; he had no future, that was plain. He was cast out, no longer appointed or anointed. So he wilfully immersed himself in the crowd's euphoric thoughts and was lost. Nobody.

" *Rejoice, people of Gallifrey. Praise and honour great Prydonius and his mighty heroes!* "

Easier said than done.

Vael had forgotten his coat. He shivered either from the vicious cold or a fever. Suddenly famished, he found himself buying a greasy quickfish from a stall at the edge of the Street. He knew he was just responding to junk thoughts, urges put in his head through cheap advertising, but he ate the gristly morsel anyway, even half enjoying its tacky blandness. It was finished in a few mouthfuls and then he wanted more; it was either more junk thoughts or they had impregnated the food with something that stimulated hunger.

He bought another.

The waves of excitement from the crowd were rising like heat, almost tangibly circling above the city like great wings.

The snow-laden sky shuddered under their beats. Carried on the heady air and antagonized by it, Vael moved with the surging crowd. Underfoot, the slushy streets were littered with trampled pamphlets supporting Rassilon's opposition faction.

Vael found that he was twisting his kerchief into a tight cord that burned his hands. His head began to swim as he was pushed on towards the parade route. The streets here were heated, making him sweat all the more. A fresh spark of anger was beginning to smoulder

in him and his soul was dry as tinder.

Cutting through the unified chanting of the mob, he heard his name called. Beside him, moving with the crowd, was Loie.

"Vael Voryunsti, you should have answered the door."

Vael might have thought " *Fall off!* " loud enough for her to hear through the chanting, but he couldn't ignore the imploring brown eyes. "Why should I?" he snapped.

She took hold of his arm. "You'll freeze out here without a coat. Look, I heard the tutor this morning. You got the highest exam quota ever in temporal manifold physics."

"So?" He snatched his arm away, but as he turned to leave her, the crowd erupted and the first dancers in the victory procession rounded the top of the street. Their voluminous skirts billowed out round them like scarlet sails as they whirled their way along the route.

"You think that they'll drop you. Is that it?"

"Why shouldn't they? I failed every other assessment!"

"But they can't afford to waste you, Vael."

"How wasteful," he heard the Pythia say again.

The spinning dancers were passing and behind them trundled a great decorated bier drawn by a plumed leviathan. The lumbering creature, its three tusks encrusted with silver, swung its massive head in time with the chanting of the crowd. On the bier, the returned crew of the *Apollaten* flung showers of gold coins to the crowd. Standing amid the piled tributes of fealty to the Gallifreyan Empire, they waved their ceremonial swords in triumphant acknowledgement.

Loie took Vael's arm tightly. "You're too valuable to them. They need temporal physicists for the Time Scaphe experiments."

The chanting of the crowd was cutting into his feverish thoughts. He wrung the kerchief through his hands. "What do you care? Leave me alone! I'm nobody! I don't want to be anyone!" He turned away from her and stared up at the bier.

High above the crowd, Prydonius lifted a glass case in a victory salute. Inside, the gnarled feline, feminine head of the Sphinx stared out over

the throng.

Its amber eye glittered and met Vael's stare. " *Who are you?* " was its riddle.

"You're an idiot!" shouted Loie in disgust at him. "Be nothing then! And you'll stay that way!"

He cried out in hatred, his anger kindled, and rounded on her.

Amid the riotous joy of the crowd, Loie screamed and fell back, her hair smoking and face blistering under the force of another's spite.

Vael turned and forced a way through the mob. He ran, angry and afraid of the power he had unleashed from inside himself. Now he was nothing. He had no future, but that was what he wanted. The future could do without him. He could hide forever in his own mind. No one would know, because no one had seen.

The uncontrolled euphoria of the crowd was changing the colour of the sky overhead. Patterns of light shifted among the heavy clouds like an aurora. It started to snow.

The city seemed to spin. Council Police were moving on to the streets to deal with a number of fights that had broken out and one reported case of spontaneous combustion.

Vael reached his room and flung himself on to the pallet, burying his feverish head under the pillow. Shut it all out. As long as no one had seen.

Again the stars spun and the dark blue oblong tumbled towards him, its beacon flashing, its engines grating. But he denied it. It was not his future. He was safe from it. And then he saw the eye again, ancient and terrible, as the Sphinx had always been to those forced to worship it. The eye glittered and pierced him with its next riddle.

" *Did I see?* "

Of course it had seen. Why else should it ask? He had been wrong. There was no escape from the future, and as the future came closer, he saw it clearer too.

Again the blue box... a TARDIS, whatever that was, tumbled. Again he was held; they were all held by the malignant eye. The eye of the Sphinx; the eye of the Pythia.

The flow of people and time on Ealing Broadway had settled into a smooth drift that was slower than was natural, but it intensified Ace's vision too. She was aware of matter shifting under the force of time's currents, little swirls of microscopic particles that eddied away from so-called solid or animate objects, much as mud slowly shifts in the flow of a river. Ace could have stopped to watch the diaphanous colours of the molecules around her for ever.

The structure of the whole street, the buildings and pavements, was seethingly alive, and the people moving through it were participants in a slow, graceful dance. But Time's currents, unlike a river, flow in many directions at once. At its centre, Ace was untouched. She found that she could move quickly between the slow-motion people she encountered. The sky still flared repeatedly with the beacon light, but the Doctor was nowhere to be seen.

He must have moved fast, but it was easy to guess where he was going. Ace had only to retrace their journey from Perivale and head towards the source of the beacon.

It was obvious what that was too. The TARDIS was somehow warning of impending crisis. The effects of it were already all around them, although the local inhabitants seemed oblivious of the fact. But then what did you expect of Perivale? Ace knew it had been a mistake to come back.

She had grown up here, but the place made her uneasy with its memories. The TARDIS was her home now; like its owner, a source of endless excitement and change. And she didn't want to lose it.

She could hear a distant noise, maybe even miles away, like something scrabbling against a hard surface. And then a splintering sound, followed by more scrabbling. Around her, the surge of dimensional currents intensified. She could sense it outside and in, like a tingle of electricity in her nerves. In her haste to catch up with the Doctor, she was already running faster than the slow-motion traffic on the main road. But she was still going to be too late.

Then she stopped short. A figure was moving slowly along the pavement towards her, emerging through the drifting molecular haze. A shortish woman, wearing a striped T-shirt and red trousers that would have looked better on someone ten years younger. Her hair was bunched up over her head and held by a mauve scarf. She was wearing too much make-up, as usual.

Ace didn't know whether to stay or hide. She turned her back and waited, trying to catch her breath, half-hoping that the figure would vanish or turn away. But despite the slow motion, the woman soon reached her.

Ace's throat had dried, but she forced herself to turn, look straight at the figure and say, "Mum?"

Her mother moved slowly past as if she hadn't even noticed Ace; her every slowed movement deliberately emphasized its detail like a ghostly ballet. She looked a bit older, but she was even still wearing Ace's dad's wedding ring. Her bag swung slowly back and forth from her shoulder with her arms, achieving a grace she had never had before.

Ace hadn't seen her for three years.

"Mum!"

But the woman never stopped.

"Why do you always look like that!" Ace yelled after her.

"Soon forgot I'd disappeared, didn't you!"

The apparition would soon be gone. Ace wanted to run after her. To pull her back and talk things over, but she didn't dare touch.

"Mum!"

Was Ace so much an outsider that they couldn't even see her now? The past was all raked up with plenty of places to go. She stared after it as it vanished on its dreamlike way. She and her mum were worlds apart already.

Yet her mother was part of the existence that was disintegrating all around her. But the Doctor needed her as well.

The beacon was still flaring across the cloudless sky. As another car drifted slowly past, leaving a spiralling slipstream of coloured molecules behind it, Ace realized that the scrabbling noise had stopped. She started to run again.

Hang on, Doctor. Just wait, will you? Ace needs you too!

A hairline crack slowly traced across the sky and then began to open, at first like crimson lightning, then like a wound.

Ace rounded a corner and saw the familiar, blue police-box shape of the TARDIS ahead. As if in answer, the unnatural spread of time juddered back into a mode that she accepted as reality.

As she walked along the sunlit avenue, she could see the light on the TARDIS's roof still flashing. The Doctor was kneeling on the pavement, apparently using his umbrella as a lever on one of the TARDIS's lower panels. In the houses around, Ace could see net curtains twitching.

There was a sharp electrical crack. The umbrella flew backwards out of the Doctor's grasp and landed in the road.

"Look at that!" he snapped as he saw Ace. He retrieved the umbrella and poked at a splintered hole in a panel at the base of the TARDIS.

Halfway up the side of the police box there was a scorch mark with an elegant swirled pattern burned into the paintwork. "This must be the impact point," he said and ran the tip of his umbrella down a blistered line which led straight to the splintered hole.

"Hang on," said Ace, "I thought you were ill."

The Doctor just looked irritated.

"Professor, I thought there was some megadisaster going on. Back there the whole of time and space was going crazy."

"You noticed it too then. Good."

"What?"

The Doctor flailed his hands in exasperation. "It's all muddled," he complained. "How can I find a rational answer if I can't even think of a question?"

Ace crouched down and squinted through the hole in the TARDIS. "Is something still in there?" she asked.

"How long did you say you'd been travelling with me in the TARDIS?"

"I don't know. Long enough."

"Yes... exactly what I thought."

That unnerved her. "What do you mean... long enough?

I'm not going anywhere. I mean I'm staying with you!"

"Long enough to understand," he snapped and began to walk slowly round the outside of his ship, tapping at its sides with his umbrella like a blind man.

Ace followed and complained as she went. "Is it the silver cat? Or was that just another collective hallucination? I thought you were ill, Professor. And what's the matter with the TARDIS? If it's under attack I want to help." She stopped as a deep grating noise began to emanate from inside the police box. The Doctor winced and pressed his fingers to his head again. He sat down on the kerb.

"Something's got inside the ship," he said, his voice quavering.

"The cat thing? Is that what was scrabbling?"

He held up a hand to stop the questions while he tried to think. "I don't know what it is or how long it's been there. We may have picked it up in vortex. But it's a threat, that's why we were summoned back."

"Summoned by the TARDIS?"

"Possibly."

"Don't you know?" She sat down on the kerb next to him. "Professor, just how long have you been travelling in the TARDIS?"

"It's not an orthodox machine. It has little idiosyncrasies, especially when it's in trouble."

"Just like its owner."

"Exactly." He looked directly at her. "Just like anyone who travels in it." The grating sound increased suddenly and the sky began to pale from blue to orange again.

Ace stood up. There was a nagging irritation in her mind and she could guess the cause. "It's in dead lumber, isn't it?

Real trouble. Sticking ideas in our heads to bring us home."

Something in his ship. Something coiling and squirming its way deeper. The Doctor felt its violation of his home as surely as if it was in his own head. He felt a cold ache and shivered in the warm sunshine. How could he cut the canker from his own mind?

From somewhere nearby, he heard the mocking jangle of an ice-cream van. It played the Westminster Chimes.

"What's it doing in there?" whispered Ace. The Doctor felt her hand on his shoulder. He took and squeezed it fondly. "What can we do?" she said. "Smoke it out?"

"Sooner said than done. There's another problem I hadn't anticipated." He cynically raised his hat to one of the twitching curtains across the road and then resumed his gloomy reverie.

Ace wasn't so easily defeated. "Come on, Professor. At least let's get inside and find out what the damage is."

He looked at her for a moment and then dug into his waistcoat pocket. "You do it," he said and gave her the key.

She walked up to the TARDIS and studied the panelled walls with increasing puzzlement. After she had walked round the police box twice, she gave up and went back to the Doctor. "Professor," she said, "I can't find the door. It's disappeared."

"That's what I was afraid of. But I had to be sure it wasn't just me."

Ace helped him to his feet. He glanced up at the lurid sky, took a deep breath and advanced on the TARDIS. With a length of green garden string, he began hurriedly measuring off distances on the blue panels.

"It's started to stop being an illusion. And soon it won't be just us who are affected."

The gaps between the paving stones glimmered and began to widen.

A police car rounded the top of the avenue and bore down on them. From inside the TARDIS came the sound of more frenzied scrabbling. The Doctor clutched at the sides of his ship and moaned.

3: Bootstrapping

" *We travel.*"

The rusty surface of Gallifrey, blotched with brown lakes and dust-grey clouds, spun beneath them and was eclipsed by darkness, devoured by the vortex void into which the Chronauts were hurled. This brief and unexpected mental image, so startling to the first-ever time travellers, still came as a shock to all those who followed on later missions. The total break from the world and reality to which they were native was like the severing of the umbilical cord that ties all

that is born with existence.

They were alone in the dark with only each other's thoughts to cling to. For a moment, in a cluster of moments, surrounded by no moments at all, hope and time trickled away into nothing.

There was a click. The toy ounce-ape whirred into life, spinning and tumbling across the floor on its whirling arms.

The Chronauts heard the Pilot's giggle. "This way," he said aloud. "Soon be there."

" *One minute since immersion*."

The spheric pool, hovering above the Time Scaphe's heart, shimmered up an image of the astral vortex outside the ship. Cascades of rainbow light streamed from a far point forming a tunnel along which the Scaphe passed.

The Chronauts reclined on couches that lay like spokes around the wheel of the chamber. Their heads that drove the ship rested against the wheel hub in whose hollowed centre sat the Pilot, playing with his toys. Only occasionally, the child tapped his fingers on a hovering grid of coloured light that guided the Scaphe through time's convoluted vectors.

The crew watched the streaming light play in the pool above their heads as they travelled up-time or down-time. It was an illusion. No one alive had seen or could imagine the *vortex real*. It was an unproven dimension which existed only in theory — and so they were travellers within its boundaries, bootstrapping their way across its coursing tumult, bringing *now* to the future or the past, in concert with laws more akin to the superstitions of the suet workers in the city. Complexities in the Scaphe's sustainers created the illusion of flight as a courtesy for the crew.

The synthetic air in the chamber was already sluggish and warm. It was no different to a hundred simulations they had been through, but if they returned home from the flight, they would be pioneers. If they did not, they were martyrs.

Captain Pekkary had no need to watch his companions.

The fusion of their minds as a crew told him everything. The Scaphe's course had been chosen and preset. Ninety minutes immersion in vortex, to emerge into real time ninety days after departure.

Pekkary closed his eyes and could still *see* their passage through the vortex. They had simply to think " *We travel*" and they went. Only the Pilot thought separately.

" *We travel.*"

The thought core of the crew, bound and woven by three years of training, virtually eliminated the necessity for a reality. Six minds in one mind. A microcosmic pool of awareness. Shared thoughts in a harmonic ratio. Except...

The loss of Chronaut Taspar from the crew had disturbed them all in its suddenness. A freak skimmer boat accident among the marshlanes near the city, only sixty-one days before their mission commenced. Taspar, a proven quantum theorist and the crew's confirmed joker, who also acted as their Pilot's guardian, responsible for the young navigator's welfare. They had all loved him.

A hurried investigation blamed the crash on a corroded fuel plug and a pocket of volatile marsh gas. The mishap was unpredictable and unfortunate. Such are the ways of the Gods.

Since the time programme could not be delayed, Taspar was interred with full posthumous honour and the mission dedicated to his memory. The affair was tidied away with efficiency and reverence. But all the crew had felt his scream and tasted mud as imagined water choked their lungs.

The Pilot had inevitably taken the loss of his "nanny"

hardest. His had been the strongest bond, but it had not been easy for any of the crew to accept Taspar's replacement into their tightly woven telepathic family.

Pekkary detected hints of unease in his second officer.

Chronaut Amnoni Distuyssor Lorizhon, daughter of the ancient House of Blyledge, had been chosen for her qualities as natural questioner and antagonist. Now Amnoni lay on her couch, unnaturally silent, directing her mind solely to the business of their flight. But Pekkary knew her better.

The problem had disturbed them all.

Taspar's replacement had been selected, Amnoni called it imposed, by the Court of Principals with no consultation with the crew. He came

from a newly prosperous family in the pasture belt valleys and his hair was almost as red and flame gold as that of the crew's Pilot. He immediately proved himself an excellent time theorist. His mind was sharp and strong-willed, responsive to decision-making, but it was also cold. It sat uneasily in the telepathic pool. His shared thoughts could be abrupt and angry. Too much the Individual.

In short, Chronaut Vael Voryunsti Sheverell was an intruder, and worse, the Pilot did not like him. The mission and all their lives lay in the hands of a four-year-old innocent who must not be provoked. And provocation seemed to be Vael's forte.

Faced with the prospect of hurled toys, temper tantrums and the possible disintegration of his crew, Pekkary directed the thought core towards the function of the Scaphe. An adequate solution. It held together, but it was no longer the team he had built.

" *Two minutes since immersion*."

Monitor units, set around the tight walls of the Scaphe, registered and recorded the crew's every movement and reaction, both physical and mental. Scientific Specimens in a sealed environment, a cradle of the future.

Plant seeds in temporal isolation tanks germinated, grew, flowered and ripened their fruits, even as the Chronauts watched. A specimen tafelshrew fell accidentally from its exercise wheel and died, its body withering away in mouldering storm of high-speed decay. Its mate gave birth and weaned its young. Thirty days in thirty minutes.

These were the easy trials. Worse by far were the missions when the Scaphe was immersed in vortex for ninety days' isolation, to return only ninety minutes after its departure.

The Captain put out of his mind that the Scaphe should make timefall somewhen or where. Such plans were as yet an impossibility. This phase of the Time Programme was barely the equivalent of the first space flights, carrying lone Heroes strapped into tin canisters on single orbits of Gallifrey.

One day, this work would also seem primitive.

Nevertheless, the prospect of a detour into the future to see where their labours would lead amused him greatly.

" *Pleasing thought*," agreed Regulator Chesperl. She turned her head to

grin at Chronaut Reogus, who lay on the next couch.

Reogus Teleem Lacott, the Battery of the Scaphe, a big-framed hulk of a man, tall as a Pythia, on whom all the telepathic energetics of the crew were focused, channelled into the ship's drive impulse. " *I lay odds they don't tell us when they do it. A depak to a dumpling the Pythia smothers the opposition before we get back*."

His fingers were linked between the couches with Chesperl's, low down where the others could not see. " *And you"11 miss Rassilon's public stoning*," her thoughts teased at him. " *I'm sure his head'll still be on a pole when we get back. Or we could always go now*."

" *And who's going to persuade the Pilot?* " interrupted Amnoni. There was a note of disapproval in her thoughts.

"The Pilot is the only one concentrating," said a voice out loud.

It was a habit that Vael had picked up to annoy them when they excluded him from their thoughts. He watched them from his couch with the air of a dispassionate sneer.

They stared back awkwardly, hiding their feelings behind smiles of concern. Chesperl put out a thread of warmth and friendship. It was turned away.

In his playpen at the heart of the ship, the Pilot had become very quiet.

At that moment, Pekkary caught the first intimations of approaching danger. Since he sensed it, they all knew.

With a smirk, Vael turned on his couch. Pulling at the monitor leads on his arms, he knelt up and looked over the top of the hollowed hub at the Pilot.

"Hello, little one," he said coldly. "Still missing nanny?"

The child, knowing things that grown-ups forgot, had been gazing up at the lights in the spheric pool. He stared at his tormentor with widening eyes and pulled his toys in close for protection.

The ship's lights guttered and the hum of the power drive fluctuated for a moment.

" *Vael*." The warnings the crew sent out were ignored.

The Pilot whimpered in anticipation of a blow.

Vael's hand darted out and snatched away one of the toys.

The child's eyes filled with a hatred that was frightening in one so innocent. The Time Scaphe lurched as the guiding concentration fell apart.

Pekkary struggled to assert an order. But " *We travel*"

was lost.

Reogus launched out of his seat. "Leave him alone, you little sheetsnacker!" he shouted, pulling Vael away by the head.

The Pilot screamed with fright. The chamber lights dimmed and the spheric pool filled all the chamber with the streaming light of the vortex.

4: Inside Information

"Come on, sir, can't you come up with a better story than that? It'll never wash down at the station, you know."

The young WPC studied the Doctor and Ace with an implacable formality. If Ace had been on her own, they would have had her down the nick and stitched up without a second thought. The Doctor, because he was old and dressed like a well-heeled weirdo, got a bit of respect. The policewoman was oblivious to the helter-skelter clouds that Ace saw racing across the livid sky above the houses behind her. She nodded to her colleague in the car and he climbed out to join her.

The Doctor shivered. He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and said wearily, "What do I want a station for? I don't want a train. I want my ship back." He leant back against the police box and slid down its length until he reached the undulating pavement. He sat there, trembling and muttering, "No way in." A film of perspiration glinted on his forehead.

"We'd better get him to a doctor," said the policewoman to her colleague.

"He is a Doctor," snapped Ace. She crouched beside him. She could still hear the scrabbling from inside the TARDIS. Again, the distant chimes of the ice-cream van sounded.

"Ace," he said, his voice trembling, "I need time to think."

"Right. I'll deal with these two."

She turned to face them, but the Doctor tugged at her arm. "It's just beyond perception," he said.

"What is, Professor?"

"The door. Wherever you stand, it's always on the next side round. The TARDIS dimensional defence systems are being altered from inside. It's been called a tomorrow conundrum."

"OK." Ace wondered if the Doctor was delirious or just normal. It wasn't always easy to tell. "Well, how do we reach it then?" she asked cautiously.

He shook his head.

"Miss?"

The policewoman was crouching beside her.

"Clear off, will you?" Ace said testily. "We're not causing any trouble."

"I think your friend would be better off in hospital."

"I said, naff off!"

She was not going to be outwitted by a bunch of out-of-order dimensions. In desperation, she tried to be practical.

"It's just a door, Professor. Suppose we both go round opposite ways and catch it at the back?"

He dismissed her idea out of hand. "No, that'd never work."

"Fine." She hated defeatists. What was he going to do?

Sit on the pavement all day until the problem solved itself?

He eyed her guiltily. "Ace. Why has the TARDIS locked me out?"

"The TARDIS? You said it had been invaded."

"Hmm. It's locked me out, but it wants me back inside."

He looked up at the two police constables and said loudly, "I must

know why."

Ace stood up unsteadily. The air was getting hazy again in a fresh drift of molecules The TARDIS's beacon seemed to thrum in her head in time with her own heartbeat. She was not sure what the Doctor meant by "beyond perception".

How could she tell what was real if she couldn't trust what she saw - or thought she saw? All she knew was that the Doctor had to be got into his ship, and whatever was in there had to be got out.

She thought she saw two police constables. She nodded at the police box. "Is this yours?" she said.

The constables glanced at each other.

"Because it wasn't here yesterday, was it?" she went on.

"And I bet they didn't say a word about it down at the nick."

The WPC was starting to get annoyed. "You know something about it, do you?" she said.

Ace shrugged. If she concentrated on one object at a time, in this case the policewoman, she could blot out the flux of dimensions blizzarding through the rest of reality.

"Dunno. It's what's inside that bothers me."

She was dimly aware of the policeman reaching into the car for the radio handset. "Get an ambulance out to us, will you?" he was saying. "And while you're at it, what have you got on an old-style police box at the corner of Bleasdale Avenue?"

There was a pause followed by a crackle of

communication.

"Well, there is now," retaliated the PC.

The thrumming in Ace's head was reaching rock-concert proportions. The scrabbling was setting her nerves on edge.

She reached out a hand to steady herself and found support on the Doctor's shoulder.

"You did that without looking," he muttered, deep in his feverish

thoughts.

"If you know what's in there, it would be a good idea to tell me," the policewoman said.

Ace smiled balefully. "Help yourself."

The WPC studied the walls and peeling blue paint of the police box, walking round it just as Ace had done. She looked increasingly puzzled.

"It's working on them too," Ace whispered. "They can't see the door either." She squeezed the Doctor's shoulder in a sort of comforted excitement.

"It's some sort of joke, isn't it?" said the WPC. "Where did you find it? In a museum?"

The Doctor looked up with a vexed expression. "That's my TARDIS you're talking about." His irritation had imposed a fresh vigour.

"Oh. Feeling better then, are we, sir?" the WPC went on.

"I think you'd better get this moved now, before I book you for causing an obstruction."

"In Perivale?" laughed Ace.

"Ace, I told you," warned the Doctor. "The virtual reality our perceptions are being fed is becoming a true reality."

Thunder seemed to rumble under the ground. The police constables both started in fright as a bolt of blue lightning seared across the swirl of the sky.

"They didn't forecast rain, did they?" the policeman said.

The WPC took Ace by the arm. "Come on, I want you two down at the station now."

"Naff off! We can't leave the TARDIS." Ace wrenched herself free and turned to find the Doctor already standing.

His new-found strength seemed to be growing.

"Before we go," he said, "I believe I am entitled to one telephone call."

The PC had opened the back door of the car. "You can do that at the station, sir."

The Doctor seemed lost for words again. Already half in the car, he shot a pleading glance at Ace. She stood firm.

"Oi, Mrs Plod, do you know who he is? I mean, do you know who you're talking to?"

"The Prince of Wales, luv. I don't care. Just get in, will you?"

The TARDIS beacon boomed out its warning.

Ace saw the road begin to stretch away towards a dazzling far point. But as it stretched, the glare on the horizon crept closer like a predatory sun.

It wasn't real. She was certain it wasn't real. It was meant to drive them inside the TARDIS.

She made a grab at the Doctor's hat. Out of its depths, she produced a whole pack of ID, credit and playing cards.

"Look," she said, fishing out the UNIT pass that actually had the Doctor's face on **it.** It had been a gift from Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart some time in the future, and was not specifically date stamped.

The WPC looked at the card. "So?" she said.

Perivale's new sun drew inexorably nearer, bleaching the colour from everything caught in its glare.

"Doctor!"

"I know." His eyes hardened with concentration as he addressed his captors. "Contact your police station. Get them to dial the card's ID code number on a telephone. You will find it immensely helpful - and so will I," he added. He was suddenly fully authoritarian again. So controlled and clipped that Ace knew their lives depended on it.

The PC ran a finger around the inside of his collar. It was getting hot. "Now look, sir..."

"Just ring the number."

"We need more proof than this."

"Ring the number, constable. Thank you very much."

The fireball was now less than two hundred metres away, seething white and looming above the dwarfed houses. The police officers remained oblivious.

"It's nothing like a phone number."

"Oh, don't bother then. Spend the rest of your short and fruitless careers pounding the same beat, wondering what might have happened."

The WPC leaned into the car. "If you won't do it..." she complained in exasperation. She reached for the handset and the Doctor climbed out of the car again. Ace caught him as he stumbled with exhaustion and helped him back to his clinging place on the side of the TARDIS.

Boom, repeated the beacon.

They stared as a nearby tree rocked on its roots in the glare, moving its branches like many monstrous arms.

Tremors ran along the street like ripples on a concave pool.

The tree exploded in flame.

The Doctor closed his eyes. "Don't move, Ace."

"What are you doing?" hissed Ace.

"Not thinking," he said. "That's the only way we'll ever get in now... if the door still exists at all."

The PC stood a little way off, spindly against the blaze of white, watching them intently. The molecular haze swirled around him in a chromatic maelstrom. His silhouette rubbed at its eyes as if they were strained. In the car, the policewoman was saying, "I know it's a crazy number, sarge.

But they could be bigwigs or something. Just do us a favour and try it."

Boom, went the beacon. Boom, echoed the houses.

Perivale shuddered.

The blaze of the fireball expanded to fill the whole blinding sky.

Reality was in white-out. A blank page or canvas.

There was a moment's silence in which the policeman looked down at his hand and saw the fingers lengthen into grey talons. What he had not seen before, he noticed now and started to scream.

A telephone rang, an old-fashioned jangle that sliced through the dreamscape like a harsh and violent knife.

Staring out at the road, the Doctor lunged backwards with his hand, instinctively finding the handle that he could not uncover by looking. The alcove in the TARDIS's door opened and he pulled out the phone he had never seen before.

"Yes," he snapped. "It's me." He grabbed Ace's arm with his other hand and held it so tightly it hurt.

She yelled a protest. The suburban road vanished as the darkness of the alcove seemed to furl round them like an envelope. They were pulled in.

A moment of pitch black that curled in their stomachs. A brief burst of fear over what they might find inside the ship. In the darkness, they heard the scrabbling close by. Something hissed at them as they passed. And then they both staggered through a door into the warm, familiar space of the TARDIS console room.

Ace faltered for a moment. The door through which they had come was the door that led into the interior of the timeship.

The double doors by which they usually entered stood opposite them, beyond the time rotor control panel, still firmly closed.

"I don't know," said the Doctor before she even had a chance to ask.

He seemed relieved. There was no apparent damage to the console room. No sign of an invader. The gentle hum of the TARDIS engines reassured him. Subdued golden light glowed behind the network of roundels that honeycombed the walls — the heart of his ship. Nothing was disturbed.

Everything appeared as he had left it.

"Has it gone flow?" said Ace.

The Doctor flicked up the scanner control and watched as panels in

the wall slid open on the screen.

Perivale was peaceful in the slanting evening sunlight.

The clouds were tinged with rose above the regimented roofs of the semi-detacheds. An ambulance was parked beside the police car. Its crew stood with the two police constables. They were staring in towards the TARDIS. The policeman was shaking his head.

No miasma. No seething fireball.

"How much of all that did we imagine?" ventured Ace.

"None of it. It was imagined for us."

He began flicking switches on one panel of the hexagonal console deck. A small monitor began to scroll with figures and letters.

"Watch the fault locator," he said urgently.

"What for?"

"A BRC. I'm running a Basic Reality Check on the TARDIS systems."

"But all that stuff was outside, I thought it had gone."

"The TARDIS wanted us in here."

"I know that, Professor. But I don't want it feeding ideas into my head. Why didn't it let us in through the front door?"

His brow was furrowed in irritation. "Just watch for anything unusual."

He had slipped off his jacket and thrown it over a chair.

He took off his hat and looked round with a frown. "Where's the hatstand?" he said.

"What hatstand?"

"There used to be a hatstand here. Oh, never mind." He put the hat back on his head and returned to the console.

Ace watched him as he ran his hands back and forth along the edge of the panelling, coaxing, almost caressing the machine. He stared intently at the racing numbers on the monitor. He hardly seemed

aware of her at all.

The copy of *Through the Looking Glass* that she had been reading lay abandoned on a chair. A stack of items that the Doctor had been meaning to repair sat in a corner. The Jibert Cathcode Troisième timepiece he had recently unearthed from somewhere elegantly ticked the meaningless timeship seconds away on a slim Doric plinth.

They were firmly attached to each other by a tiny gravity bolt to withstand the TARDIS's frequent lurches.

A selection of her clothes, much in need of laundering, loitered menacingly behind a threadbare antique chesterfield. The Doctor had given up complaining about them, since she would only point out that he had not changed his own clothes for weeks.

There was a bleep as the fault locator completed its search. The Doctor frowned. "All systems normal." He closed the scanner panels and shut out Perivale.

"Nothing to worry about then," said Ace. But she couldn't believe it.

"Unless there's a fault on the fault locator."

Ace walked towards the closed double doors and stared at them for a moment. "So what's all the fuss then?"

She turned towards the console. Something was missing. A gap amongst the nearest panel's multifarious gadgets and controls. It was a few seconds before she realized what had vanished.

"Doctor? Where's the door handle?"

She reached for the empty space.

"Ace, no!" He was around the console catching her hand before she touched the panel.

"But it's gone," she cried.

"No, not just *gone*. It's been deliberately removed." He walked slowly up to the doors and tentatively laid one ear to them. When he turned back, his eyes were deep with anxiety. His voice had lowered to a whisper. The console room was suddenly a shadowy, brooding place.

"Ace. Suppose you're at the front door of your house and there's something blocking the hallway. What do you do?"

"Go round the back."

"Exactly."

They both heard it. A scrabbling noise just at the other side of the door. A cold, chitinous scraping like claws against metal. They slowly backed away.

"Can it get in?" said Ace.

"It's working on it," he said.

"I thought it had gone."

"No."

She was startled by the look that crossed the Doctor's face. A fierce rage that was unlike him. He crossed the room and started to fumble through his jacket, eventually producing a rod of tubular steel.

" *My* TARDIS," he said.

He drew the device out like a telescopic aerial and, holding it at arm's length, lowered it towards the console panel opposite the doors. Electricity cracked up in a blue surge and knocked him backwards.

Ace caught him and hugged him protectively. He was shaking. "Not something you should try at home," he muttered, flailing out his fingers.

"But the controls are live."

He pulled free of her grip. "I doubt that. Not all of them."

Before she could stop him, he put his hand on another section of the console.

Nothing happened.

"You see? Only the door-handle panel has been electrified."

"To stop us opening the doors," she said. "The TARDIS

is protecting us."

Once again, the scrabbling behind the door began in earnest.

"Or protecting itself," he snapped. His look of anger had become grimly determined. Avoiding the electrified panel, he began to adjust instruments around the console, snapping up switches, keying in instructions.

"What are you doing, Professor?" said Ace.

"I don't want that thing in here. Whatever it is."

"But where's it going to go?"

"Anywhere. It's not staying in my ship."

She listened to the persistent scrabbling for a second.

"But you don't know what it is. You can't just flush it out here.

It's Perivale."

The Doctor looked at her with a cold detachment. "Afraid of what your mother might say?"

She couldn't believe he had said that. Couldn't believe he could be that cruel. How could he have seen? "What do you know about it?" she demanded.

He carried on checking the instruments regardless.

"Look at these readings," he complained. "Baloney, all of it.

Nothing tallies. You stupid machine, there are records of flights here we haven't even been on."

"It's your ship," she accused. "Don't you know how to work it?"

For a moment his eyes were so fierce that she thought he might throw her out too. Then his look melted. "You're right, Ace. Of course you're right," he said, his voice full of reason. "As long as whatever it is stays trapped between the inside and the outside, we can find a way to get rid of it somewhere else."

He began to flick through the sequence of levers and switches that made up the TARDIS dematerialization program. The ship gave an unexpected judder and the scrabbling came to an abrupt stop. The underlying note of the engines moved up a semitone. At the centre of the console, the clear glass column began to rise and fall gently, the lattice of lights and crystals at its heart flickering with the compulsion

of the ship's flight. Ace took a deep breath. They were away from Perivale and Earth, but they still carried the threat with them.

The Doctor did not allow himself a single moment of relief or relaxation. In a corner of the console room sat a small mahogany travelling chest which he had never bothered with before. He unlocked the chest with a small brass key and threw open the lid. It was packed with large antique books. He faltered and stared down at the contents.

Imprints of slime traced over the morocco bindings. He lowered in his hand and reached for the heavy tome marked *TARDIS Manual*. It squelched as the covers gave under his grip. Inside, the tough parchment paper had been chewed and devoured. The remains of its pages were turning to a stinking yellow slush around the edges.

The Doctor stood up with slime dripping between his fingers. "Ace. It's taken away my knowledge," he said quietly.

"But I don't understand." She pointed to the doors. "We just heard it through there."

"It's disturbed the TARDIS parameters. Time echoes back and forth across the dimensional interfaces. It was there. It's already been here." He looked helpless. "The TARDIS is in crisis. This intruder... !" his voice rose in a crescendo of anger, and then dropped again. "It's destroyed my understanding of the ship. Now we may never find a way out again."

"How's it got in?" She began to stare round the console room, expecting some hideous monstrosity to come lurching out of the shadows. "You never use the manual anyway."

"Not for simple tasks. But the TARDIS is an immeasurably complex machine: Its maintenance needs expertise in everything from plumbing to psychology."

"But you must know how to work it. You built it."

He threw down the ruined volume in exasperation and began to pull other books from the chest. Their pages were intact.

"Look at this. You'd think it knew exactly what it wanted."

At the back of the chest, a hole had been torn. A veneer of slime clung to the splinters. A path of glistening imprints led from the back of the

chest to a small gap in the walls where the dimensions of the TARDIS were not quite flush with one another.

The Doctor probed the slime with the metal rod. "A single line of oval mucous exudations. Consistent with some sort of monopod mollusc."

"So it's loose in here with us."

The Doctor sank down on to a chair. His face was weary and sullen. "It could be anywhere in the ship."

"So we'll find it and get rid of it."

"Don't you understand, Ace? It could be a datavore."

"A what?"

"Omnivores, Kronovores, Haemovores. This creature might have the ability to ingest information like food. It may feed on knowledge."

"You think it's going to try and take over the TARDIS."

" *My* TARDIS. Using inside information stolen from me!

That's why we were summoned back. There's no knowing what damage it could do — worming its way into the systems. The whole ship could disintegrate in the process."

An insistent trill sounded from the console. The central column shuddered as it rose and fell in its placement. Ace left the Doctor in his chair and studied the panels.

"What co-ordinates did you set when we left Earth?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Somewhere secluded. The Ballard system in the Green Dragon Nebula."

"Because they're all on zero."

"What?" He was beside her in a second, scanning the instruments from over her shoulder. Every dial and readout was dead, yet the engines still droned and the glass column undulated with their flight.

"No!" With a cry of anger, he ducked under the spread of the console. Ace followed and saw him tentatively open the inspection panel in the support column.

Inside, lights twinkled along sheaves of fibres like impulses moving on a nervous system. Set in the heart of the synthetic ganglia was a row of glass rods, each filled with silver liquid. The Doctor tapped at one of the rods with a pencil. A droplet of mercury fell from one end and splashed on the edge of the hatch, spraying a hundred silvered globules across the floor.

"Now the fluid links are playing up," complained the Doctor. "There's only vestigial power reaching the console."

The console room lights dimmed noticeably and the energetics on the fibres slowed to a trickle. The note of the engines began to grind effortfully down. Ace shivered. There was a sudden chill in the air.

"The power's draining away," muttered the Doctor.

"We're already down to candlepower." He had begun to systematically test each instrument on the console.

Nothing responded. The console was as good as dead.

"Perhaps the thing eats energy as well," Ace suggested and immediately regretted it. "Look, I mean there must be secondary supply. A spare."

"There used to be a secondary control room."

"Yes?"

"But I think it might have got deleted. I certainly haven't seen it for a while."

"I'm not surprised with the state of those corridors."

He walked to the inner door and stared into the darkening depths of his ship. "It's in there somewhere, Ace. I have to find it."

"Professor, just how big is the TARDIS?"

He grimaced. "Depends."

The engine sound reached a final throaty groan and expired entirely. Only a sickly glimmer of light remained.

The TARDIS was unnaturally silent.

The Doctor's fist beat once against the wall. It was a decision. He

turned towards Ace and she saw that his face was drawn with a tight mask to hide his feelings.

"Ace, we rely on each other, don't we?"

"Of course we do, Professor."

"Good. From now on, *we* rely on you."

"We?"

He fumbled in his trouser packet and produced the key to his ship. "Look after this for us," he said.

"Why? I'm not going outside."

"Neither am I... we. Just don't lose it."

"Haven't you got a spare of this either? Anyway, I'm coming with you."

He shook his head. "You're much more use to us here, Ace. And it'll be safer. The safest place of all. Don't leave home, Ace." He dabbed her nose with his finger. "Trust us."

" *Us* being you and the TARDIS," she said angrily.

He was already disappearing down the dark corridor.

"Professor!"

For a moment, she saw the pale glow of a bicycle lamp and heard the ring of his bell. Then his voice echoed up out of the gloom.

"Remember, Ace. Don't leave home."

5: There's No Place Like Home

No past. No future.

The vortex streaming wildly. The silhouette shapes of the crew, arms outstretched, seeking each other and calling aloud because their minds are dark. Blundering as their vessel lurches unpiloted in the tumult of time's maelstrom.

There is only now.

"Chesperl!"

"Reogus. I'm here!"

"Where are your thoughts? I cannot find you."

Specimen tanks and equipment slide loose like dried beans on the Pilot's drum.

"Amnoni. I cannot hear you."

"Lost. We're lost."

Clinging to the hub of the Scaphe, Vael watches them.

They cluster in a huddle, arms around each other, searching for their lost thoughts, pushing him out of their clique.

Trained in the disciplines of logic and the irrefutable sciences, they are praying aloud to the Gods for salvation.

In their terror there is only now.

The lights of the vortex reeled in Vael's head like scattered moments of the siren past, willing him out of reality into the safety of his memories.

It was too easy and he knew it. A path had been cut through his studies to lead him inexorably to his current placement on the Scaphe. He scoffed as sacrifices of propitiation on secret altars were made on his behalf. But doors opened. Opportunity, never a lengthy visitor, called often. A hidden guiding hand slapped away all opposition.

Even now, as the primal energies of creation tore at the ship, he was not afraid. It was always with him. The eye that watched in his head. Sometimes the Sphinx, sometimes the wise woman, sometimes the copper moon Pazithi Gallifreya.

And sometimes, when he best knew despair, the wild eye of an innocent girl wreathed in scorching smoke.

He had a power in him. A power to manipulate and inflict, to scorch and wither. They might call it a crime —

those who thought themselves powerful. But *she*, the most venerable of all, sought this power, even came into his head after it. She imagined she used him for her own purpose —

whatever that might be. Perhaps, but he used her also. He was the Individual among Individuals. The power was his.

And even he — until he understood the nature of his crime and could control it — even he was afraid of it.

Where would it lead? When would he fulfil a legend and have his own victory parades through the City?

He watched the helpless crew of the Scaphe and began to laugh as they grovelled in their superstitious misery.

A sharp pain shot through his hand. He spun and saw the Pilot, eyes burning with hate, sinking his milk teeth into the flesh.

Vael gave a yell and pulled back his bleeding hand in agony. He stared up at the reeling spheric pool overhead.

Out of the chaos tumbled a shape he knew. Hard blue planes and angles. A light flashing like a beacon on its crown.

"Look," said the Pilot, his voice full of a sudden wonder that washed away the fear.

He pointed a tiny finger upwards as the spinning object bore inexorably in upon them.

Ace had waited ten minutes by the Jibert Cathcode clock and that was enough. She had tried to look at her book, but the dim light strained her eyes and the words strained her brain.

She tried to doze. Her head was too busy. The silence got on her nerves, but the incessant tick of the clock in the silence was worse. There were things she wanted from outside the console room: food and a drink and a bath. She stood in the open doorway and looked out into the darkened corridor.

The TARDIS had become a cold place. The air had taken on a damp chill that cloyed wet in her lungs. What was she afraid of? She had only to cross the passage, but the cold darkness out there was like a wall.

She drew back into the room. Still no life in the console.

The rotting manual lay where the Doctor had dropped it.

Behind the chest, the track of slimy prints still glistened. It might be

her imagination, but the gap in the walls looked a little wider and taller. She was sure she had heard it crack slightly, as if the dimensions of the ship itself were slipping apart.

Then the scrabbling started again. It was still there, behind the doors, where it had first been.

She crossed to stare at the doors. It wasn't an echo in the dimensions. She could see the doors give slightly as whatever it was pressed against them from the outside.

But it couldn't be out there and inside simultaneously.

The Doctor was wrong, unless there was more than one of the creatures.

She ran back to the console. There was a small receiver point on one panel which might act as an intercom system.

She pressed the button beside it. "Doctor? Doctor, if you can hear me, please get back here now. It's up here in the control room. Doctor, I need help."

There was a sudden click. Ace was startled by a small hatch that opened on the panel. Out of it, like a newspaper popping through a letter box, rose a scroll of grey parchment tied with a silver ribbon.

Behind the doors, the scrabbling scraping increased in its industry.

Ace lifted out the scroll and the hatch snapped shut again. The console was as dead as before. The scroll was dusty, like something abandoned for centuries deep beneath the desk of an ancient mummified solicitor. Ace's fingers fumbled with the knotted ribbon, but the tangle slipped undone easily and the parchment unrolled across the console in front of her.

It was grey and empty. There was not a mark on the paper, yet when she looked directly at the surface, it almost seemed to fall away from her. There was a sparkle somewhere in its grey depths. Somehow it was important.

Why else would it have appeared? She knew she had to get it to the Doctor.

She rolled the parchment tight and tangled the ribbon around it. Picking up the Doctor's jacket, she hunted through its seemingly

bottomless pockets. Amongst the jumble of gadgets and sweet papers, she eventually found a pocket torch. It lit like a searchlight.

The scrabbling had not relented. She could see the doors moving under its attack. And when she looked at the gap in the walls, it was definitely larger. It gave a splitting noise and she saw a fine hairline crack spreading across that section of the wall. There were other cracks too, at points all around the circular room.

She pulled on her own jacket against the cold and shone the torch out of the door. It threw a harsh glare. The wrong kind of light, too cold for these normally warm passageways, and when she glanced behind, her own shadow was huge and menacing up the wall.

Like something following her.

She slid the parchment into an inside pocket and headed into the depths of the TARDIS.

Even by torchlight, the ship was getting ramshackle. Ace figured that if the Doctor spent less time playing the roles of Great Intriguer and self-appointed Nanny to the Universe, he might get his time machine into some semblance of running order. As it was, he only appeared to effect repairs when it became imperative, which usually meant life-threatening. In occasional bursts of activity, he might dismantle a tachyon infiltrator or adjust a dimensional template, but this was usually preceded by "I wonder what would happen if. . ." and followed by a loud bang, a curse and a lot of smoke.

The haphazard lash-ups of exposed joints and fibre leads that littered the ship slowly grew in number. They sprouted like rampant vines out of the recessed roundels honeycombing the walls, tangling their way behind the antique furniture and functional workbenches.

The corridors were interminable. They rambled on uncontrolled like growing capillaries. The Doctor had muttered about instability in the infinitely variable interior mapping. He had complained about fractal faults in the architectural configuration circuits. But he had done nothing.

He hated decorating. In desperation, he had lately taken to traversing the corridors on a battered bicycle. Ace preferred to walk.

On previous solo trips into the TARDIS's depths, she had begun to get more than an inkling that the ship had had several previous owners before the Doctor. There were sections of the labyrinthine interior that

had obviously once been well used, yet they were totally ignored now. Several times, she had taken a turning she thought she recognized and stumbled into a new compartment, room or cupboard.

She discovered an overgrown courtyard with crumbling stone arches that made her think she was in the open air.

But when she tried to find it again, it seemed to have vanished completely. There was a room of tissue-thin circuitry screens like webs of white lace that crawled with strands of light like silk worms. Elsewhere she had found a gentlemen's changing room, full of neglected cricket bats and cracked red leather cricket balls.

In a dusty library, stacked with books and parchments, was a medieval manuscript entitled *The Doctour of Science's Tale*. It was inscribed *Fare ful wel, Doctour*, and signed *Geoffrey Chaucer. Year of our Lord, 1388*. Next to this was a volume of *Baedeker's Galactic Guide, Volume XXVII, Bajazet Magna to Bali*, and a stack of 45 singles and EPs by Billy Fury, Adam Faith and The Beatles.

In one corridor, there was an overhead trapdoor with a steel ladder strapped to the ceiling. Since it was out of her reach, Ace had asked the Doctor about it. He had looked a bit furtive and mumbled something incomprehensible, so Ace had called it the loft and had forgotten about it.

She had found another passageway that was lined with oil paintings and chugged with a sound like the engines of a steam ship. The corridor shut off abruptly in a blank wall, just over halfway across van Eyck's painting "The Arnolfini Marriage". Mr Arnolfini stood alone in his fur-trimmed gown and wide black hat accompanied by half a dog. This surviving section of the portrait was welded to the surface of the blank wall. Of Mrs Arnolfini there remained only a reflection in the central convex mirror.

This time, as Ace moved through the shadowy corridors at the edge of the pool of torchlight, there was nothing familiar. And no sign of the Doctor either.

The deeper she went, the colder it seemed to get. She could see her breath in the air. There were no longer doors in the walls, just the roundel recesses stretching away to the left and right, the pattern broken occasionally by the Palladian-style columns. She had tried to follow the right-hand turning at each junction, but she was still unsure that she would ever find the way back.

Eventually she rounded a corner and saw the Doctor's battered bicycle propped against a column. It was facing her, as if he had been returning. There were slimy footprints around it, leading off into the darkness. The Doctor was nowhere to be seen. She yelled for him several times, but her voice was dulled as if it carried no further than the torchlight.

The isolation hit her. She had not been alone for.., she was going to say months, but travelling with the Doctor made it difficult to gauge the passage of relative time. Her existence was spent in the haphazard jumble of other people's days and nights.

Who was she going to argue with now?

She suddenly realized the purpose of the Jibert Cathcode Troisième in the console room — a one constant indicator of how their and the ship's personal time progressed.

There was a deep rumble from further along the corridor. Shining her torch ahead, she edged forward.

Something moved on the corner of the light and then sprang out in front of her.

The cat, if it was the same creature she had seen on Ealing Broadway, had grown larger. Big as an urban night-time tom cat. King of the alley. Its silvered body shimmering, throwing back the light, moving with a muscular, liquid smoothness that didn't look real.

It splayed its paws and arched its back. Its tail swung angrily from side to side.

Ace slid backwards. The cat didn't belong here. It was out of place. It belonged in a different reality. It bared its teeth and hissed.

She kept the animal directly in the torch beam, groping blindly behind her as she edged back. The cat came on, its eyes fixed on her. It spat, but she was staring at the corridor beyond it — the passage down which she would just have gone. The walls were slowly rippling. As she watched, they dissolved into a slow-churning ferment of dimensional dementia.

The cat yowled and crouched back as if to pounce. Ace turned and ran — it was like running uphill as the world was sucked past her. She made to grab at the bicycle, but its handles slipped through her fingers and the machine slid towards the approaching whirlpool of

dissolving walls.

As she ran forward, she felt herself falling. She hit the floor and skidded along the length of the corridor. Something slammed hard behind her. She stared back and saw a new wall in the torchlight blocking off the way she had come. She clambered to her feet. The cat was gone, but she could still hear the churning beyond the walls, and through it she thought she heard voices. A muddle of voices calling out in distress.

Other walls were sliding like ghosts through the dark corridor. There were cries from the shadows. She glimpsed half-figures like wraiths, their arms outstretched in desperation. Another ship, its shapes tilting absurdly and spinning. And now the real walls were tilting in to trap her.

"Doctor!" she yelled and put her head down and ran.

The whole superstructure of the TARDIS shook around her, but she ran blind, instinct drawing her upwards. She spun a corner and found herself back in the console room.

There was no one there. No Doctor.

Ace clung to the edge of the console to get her breath back. The door slammed of its own accord. Beyond it, there was a dull roar like a storm beating against the room.

If the Doctor was right, she was safe here — at home.

But if the TARDIS was breaking up, how was she to save him? She rammed her hand into her pocket. The scroll was still lodged there and she had the key to the ship. She didn't dare think that he had bequeathed his TARDIS to her. She stood alone, trying to pull any sense out of her predicament.

She wanted the Doctor back, that was all.

Across the console, the double doors were bulging with pressure from outside. The scrabbling behind them had intensified. Cracks ran across their surfaces and little slivers of material dropped like shattered eggshell. A segment split and Ace glimpsed something grey and slimy that writhed inside.

She struck at the panel, desperately trying to force something to work. The scanner screens slid jerkily open and Ace stared in bewilderment

at the display.

The scanner in the console room showed the console room and the scanner in that console room showed the console room and the scanner in that console room showed the console room and the scanner in that console room showed...

More fragments of the eggshell door fell away as the newborn creature inside began to force its way out.

With a whirr, the Jibert Cathcode Troisième clock prepared to strike the hour. It never completed its task.

The ghost shapes slid through the contours of the console room. Anguished faces from another ship. The grinding of overlaid realities. The birth scream of the monster. Then the real walls ruptured and gave out at last, bursting apart around Ace. She was hurled through blinding white into darkness.

"Doctor!"

Time inverts, spewing and hurling its cogs, wheels, spindles and springs across space.

Ace, plunging into oblivion, has one last thought, but disturbingly it is not her own. The Doctor is thinking, " *The Process is only beginning*."

6: Night School

Ace's heart sank. "How did you get here?" she complained.

"How do you think I got here?" said her mother. "By time storm?"

"Don't be stupid."

Ace shifted uncomfortably at her desk. Why was *she* here? *She* never bothered with school. School was somewhere that got Ace off her hands during the day. *She* was a beautician with a face like powder-caked plastic. *She* never bothered with Ace's school. And to make sure, Ace always "lost" letters about parent-teacher meetings on the way home.

Through the wide school windows, Ace saw the boys playing football on the tarmac below. She had a sudden urge to go and kick a ball around with them.

The teacher finished writing on the blackboard. The wedge of chalk he used was attached to the tip of his umbrella.

"Today I want to take a look at parenthood and some of the issues surrounding it."

"Oh, God," muttered Ace. "Is that why you're here?"

Her mother shrugged.

Ace's friend Manisha, one row in front, shook her long dark hair and leaned back in her chair. She looked awkward.

A pink burn scar on her brown cheek was barely healing.

"Sorry, Ace," she said, keeping her dark eyes to the floor.

There were scars that wrinkled the skin on her hands as well. She sat forward again and exchanged glances with Shreela at the next desk.

This isn't happening, thought Ace. They're not really going to do this to me. Not in front of the whole class.

The teacher launched into that familiar hectoring style that he reserved for lectures. "None of you will have children as yet... I hope. But all of you will have parents in some circumstance or other."

"Too right," punctuated Ace loudly. This was the same old stuff. Boring, boring, boring.

Except of course for the person they'd invited behind her back.

"Pay attention, Dorothy," warned the teacher.

A paper dart launched out from the back of the room. It rose up towards the strip light and glided down to rest at the teacher's feet. He picked it up and studied it for a moment.

The name *Nosferatu* was scrawled in biro on one paper wing.

"Aerodynamically primitive," the teacher declared, "but then so was Leonardo's helicopter." He launched it back across the class and scrutinized its flight, forgetful of his lecture.

"Is this what they call the National Curriculum?" said Ace's mother scornfully.

There was a loud guffaw from the back of the room. Ace turned and saw Sabalom Glitz lounging in the back row. The space mercenary's sharp blue eyes were laughing at her.

There was a week of stubble on his chin and the beer stains of a thousand interstellar dives and seedy speakeasies on his leather tunic. He held the paper dart between his grubby fingers. "I won't say a word, sprog," he leered. "Your mother wouldn't like it."

Ace scowled and turned away. They were turning up from all over. Bad memories. It was getting too much like *This is Your Life*.

Captain Sorin of the Red Army's Special Missions Brigade frowned at her from the next desk. A grave frown that she had once almost loved.

"Ace," he said in his curdled Russian accent, "we all have our faiths. Remember?"

"I thought you were dead," she said bitterly.

"Not in your head, *tavarisch*. Mother is the first thing any child believes in. So have faith now."

"I don't want any more lectures," exploded Ace. "When did she ever believe in me? What is this anyway? If I hadn't seen her in the street, I wouldn't have been reminded. I wouldn't be having this dream, she wouldn't be here and you wouldn't all be ganging up on me!"

The teacher turned to glare at her. "Ace!"

She stood up and walked between the desks towards him. "Professor, you've got chalk dust all down your jacket."

The Doctor pulled a grimace of defeated

embarrassment as she started to dust down his lapels.

"Oh, yeah," she went on and rummaged in her jacket. "I had to give you this."

As she produced the scroll of grey paper from her pocket, she caught sight of her mother's stare. It was that look that always came when the Christmas card from Ace's dad arrived. Far away, lost and bitterly hurt.

"Come back, Dory," she said. "There are things we need to talk about."

Ace turned hurriedly away. In that split second, the Doctor had gone.

"Professor?"

She heard the distant bicycle bell from outside. From the window, she saw him scooting between the footballers on the playground.

"Professor! It's important!"

Out in the last sunlight he rode, past other mothers who waited at the school gate for their kids. Out through the gathering dusk into the labyrinthine roads and avenues and corridors and passageways and dead ends of Perivale.

The bicycle bell merged with the urgent ringing that meant the end of class.

7: Non vultus, non color

The urchin was trying to move the rock, but it was too big for him to manage alone. It was bigger than anything in the whole world. His ball had rolled down a crack under the boulder and his arm was too short to reach it. When he pushed against the stupid rock, he saw his face clearly reflected in its shiny surface where the dust had wiped away.

He gave up and clambered down the mound of rubble, the remains of a side wall that had fallen away from one of the buildings. He lay back next to a tuft of dry white grass.

He tried to sleep, because the dreams he had were far better than staying awake. The dreams were in fierce colour like the stars, not shades of grey like the world.

It was no good, the brittle grass stalks scratched at his skin. Wide awake, be stared up at the angular grey walls that towered over him. Above them, stars winked in the black sky. In his satchel, he still had a couple of the biscuits from the machine. He had given the rest to Shonnzi as usual, so he had to make these last. Two bells ago, he had found some berries growing along one of the artery alleys.

Shonnzi had told him not to touch them, but they were so glossy and moist that he couldn't resist a couple.

He had been sick for a whole bell and Shonnzi had said,

"I told you so."

His stomach still felt like someone else's, but he was really hungry and managed half of the dry biscuit. He had some water too that Shonnzi had brought from the hose spring. Shonnzi always knew what was best.

Sometimes one of the Others, usually Amnoni, would give him some of their food. She would leave it on a ledge somewhere when the guards were not there. He would creep out to take it and sometimes see the work gang watching him from a distance. But they never approached him and he just snatched the food and ran. Sometimes it was the food he had given Shonnzi to give to them. He never told Shonnzi about that either, because he wanted anything he could get.

He heard a high, raucous chitter-chitter and darted for cover into the shadows of a doorway. Guards were coming, their armoured feet tramping in the dust. He peered out of the doorway and saw them pass the end of the alley, marching in a single line along the main artery towards the Dial Square. The starlight glinted off their eyes and burnt red polished heads like the scuttlers in the rubble and dung.

The goik was with the guards too. The urchin hated the goik. The goik had trapped him once on the Middle Phase and nearly torn his arm off dragging him towards the Watch Tower. Shonnzi had caught up with them just outside the gates.

The urchin had run off while Shonnzi and the goik were bashing each other up. He hid where no one would find him and tried not to cry. But Shonnzi still knew where he was. He was hugged and rocked gently as Shonnzi said, "It's all right, kid. It's all right. As long as you're all right, I'm all right."

It was quiet again. The guards had gone. The urchin went back to the mound of rubble. He hunted round for something to use and found an old table leg that would be a good lever to lift the rock.

The Captain of the Phazel work gang sat sullenly on his own, a little way from the rest of the group. The other three squatted around a makeshift fire built from the overroots and splintered furniture that they had gathered during the bellday's work. The firelight painted fresh shadows up the grey buildings on this corner of the Dial Square, deserted colonnades and balconies long fallen into disrepair or simply fallen, briefly touched with flickering gold. The air was still.

The smoke rose in a straight unbroken column into the dark sky.

Beyond the fire glow was only star silver and dull drained grey.

The Phazel gang were not cold, despite their ragged overalls and stolen greatcoats. Their eyes were so accustomed to the twilight that they no longer recognized it as anything but normal. But the fire they habitually built had a life of its own. The crew could stare mindlessly into the flames, letting the flickering shapes fill their empty thoughts.

Any desperate thing to pass the time.

The Captain unfolded the crumpled piece of paper he had studied any number of times before.

I am Quennesander Olyesti Pekkary, first son of the House of Fordfarding. My mother was Olyes Dryanasor. Her mother was Dryana Shylvarsor and her foremother was Shylvar Karyesti...

It meant less each time he stared at it, and he still remembered nothing new. A head full of memories that might be just imagination. Nothing he was certain of.

"Captain," said Amnoni Distuyssor quietly.

He looked up and saw Vael moving out of the greyness towards them. The young man had a new jacket. Dark green with gold cord at the shoulders. He almost swaggered with a cruel confidence.

Captain Pekkary rose wearily. He pulled forward his lank greying hair so that it covered the purple scar on the left side of his face. The other Phazels kept their places, staring too fixedly into the fire, listening as he spoke for them.

"Well?" said Vael.

Pekkary shook his head. He looked sidelong at Vael with his good eye. "You have been told before."

There was a nervous tick that Vael gave to his head when he was angry, as if he was biting back his words. He feigned a smile. "Where do you think that'll get you?"

"We'll see."

"You're half starving as it is, Pekkary. The Process is getting angry.

"My crew won't work in that section of the City. It's dangerous down there. It has a bad feeling. None of us goes further in than the Hollow

Hand."

Vael turned sharply towards the others. "You're superstitious idiots," he accused. "You're given food and you fling it away. And where's Shonnzi? Still living off your scraps? He'll be caught soon. He can't escape it."

Pekkary stayed silent, so Vael smiled profusely again and put on his infants and idiots voice. "This is what the Process told me to tell you. That section of the City is subject to minor static shifts. Nothing dangerous. All you've seen is electrical discharge. Not a haunting."

Reogus stood up. His burly form in his long coat dwarfed Vael. "I've seen figures and shapes down there," he insisted angrily. "And Chesperl's heard voices too. Crying and wailing."

"It was something in pain," said Chesperl. She moved in close to Reogus, her face thin and drawn with concern. "A horrible sound."

"We've all heard it," added Amnoni. "None of us goes into that section now. Not since the Beginning."

Vael clenched his teeth. "Then how do you know about

'figures and shapes'?"

"You go in there then," snapped Reogus. "Or send the Process. I want to see how that filthy thing deals with it."

They had begun to close in around Vael, slowly drawing a knot. His eyes darted from one haggard face to another.

"That section is not haunted," he repeated tightly. "The Process drove the evil out of the world in the Beginning. We know that. We were all there."

"Perhaps its memory lingers," said Pekkary.

The knot was drawing tighter, forcing Vael closer to the fire. Its flames blazed eagerly up in a sudden crackle of sparks. Vael began to panic. "I can't go on pleading with the Process forever," he insisted. "And there'll be no more food until you continue the search."

"But *you're* not starving, are you?" emphasized Reogus.

"Far from it, you little rat." He put a massive hand on Vael's shoulder and pulled at the gold cord.

"Guards," whispered Chesperl.

Three guards were placed in a line halfway across the Dial. No closer yet, because the threat would be enough.

Their eyes, like bunches of red berries on their armoured heads, twitched as they watched.

"You can let me go now," said Vael.

Reogus glanced at Pekkary for instruction.

One of the guards slowly unwound a segmented whip.

Pekkary looked determined. "Tell the Process that we will work in the section..."

"What?" interrupted Amnoni Distuyssor.

Vael was beginning to grin, but Pekkary raised a hand.

"We will work in the section when we get more food... and if you come with us!"

Reogus laughed out loud. He shoved Vael towards the guards, ripping away the gold shoulder cord as he did so.

"Whoops," he said.

The collaborator turned and faced them. His head ticked nervously again as he pushed a hand through his long red hair. "Tell Shonnzi that we want him. And the little one too.

Soon."

He walked hurriedly from the square, the guards following and chittering as they went.

There was no more to be said. They were thought-blind and alone. Each of them alone in their thoughts. Speech was not always enough to communicate frustration or love.

They had been Chronauts. Now they were Phazels. But they were still a crew. Truly Individuals, but still together.

They returned to their places by the fire, Pekkary settling down on the ground away from the rest, his head resting on a mound of dried

lichen as he tried to sleep.

Chesperl and Reogus huddled together, wrapped in their coats and staring into the depths of the fire.

From a ragged pocket, Amnoni pulled a scrap of paper.

I believe I was born Amnoni Distuyssor Lorizhon, daughter of the House of Blyledge. My Family is an old and ancient one, but I cannot remember it any more. I believe that I was the oldest daughter. I was born to be a mother and kithriarch. When will I ever gain my birthright?

Somewhere there was the fractured chime of a cracked bell.

Ace's eyes were stinging. She had opened them and they were full of dust. It was pitch dark and she had to keep rubbing them with her fists until they watered away the burning.

She coughed, nearly choked. Her throat was raw and she was full up with dust. She froze, not knowing where she was. And no way of knowing. The dust was clinging all over her, coarse and itchy. She reached into the dark with her hands. The floor where she had been lying was rough and stony. You've fallen on stony ground, Ace.

Of course. That was her name. Ace. She'd been trying to remember.

She pushed upwards and was showered with loose stones and sand from some sort of roof just over her head.

The instinct to panic shuddered through her, but she forced it back down again. She sat, unable to move in the darkness, her breath coming in short bursts, trying to keep up with her racing brain. Why would anyone want to bury her alive? She couldn't be tombed up, there was air in here. It was prickly with dry dust. But if she'd been dead she wouldn't have needed air till now, would she? So maybe...

She was ravenously hungry too. She could murder a bag of chips. Not so much a bag, more a rucksack. Then she remembered the TARDIS and events came jumbling back uninvited into her head. She shivered and sat praying that it was more than just a memory. Even if it was over now.

It had been like this when she first got to Iceworld. Blasted out of existence on Earth by a freak chronometeorological event that turned out to be no freak at all. Left stranded on a distant planet, where, by Machiavellian design, she would accidentally run into the Doctor.

She was aching all over, just as she had ached then.

Was it another time storm? Perhaps time storms followed her about? Or maybe she caused them. It had ripped apart the Doctor's ship. The TARDIS had disintegrated around her and so everything in it had been hurled out of one existence, spilling across the time and space continua between which the ship slipped. Her included. Chucked out into reality. Any time, any space.

Everything was all gone. She sat and waited for it to hit her. But her thoughts were numb. She had to find the Doctor

— and that wasn't logical, it was instinct. But he'd gone too, hadn't he? She couldn't even start getting her head round that. So she sat. Exhausted, aching, famished and bloody dusty.

Something was tapping close by. There was a chink of blueish light just above her eyeline. Something black was pushing through the gap. It poked her in the arm.

"Oi," she shouted.

The stick or rod stopped moving for a moment and then began to push like a lever. "Doctor? Is that you?" yelled Ace.

"I'm in here. Get me out!" Her throat clogged with dust and her nose began to stream.

She set her hands to the roof and heaved through a shower of grit. The darkness exploded away in a tumble of shining rocks. Ace burst out into the light like a jack-in-the-box. She lay for a moment half in, half out of her cell, trying to get her breath back.

There was something in her hand. She lifted her head and looked at it. A small blue ball, battered with a chunk missing and the flaking shapes of gold eyes stamped all over it. She closed her own eyes again and felt sick.

Something moved near her. She looked up and saw a kid staring at her. He was halfway down the pile of rubble, so his head was level with hers. A scruffy, mucky kid, maybe five or six years old, with wild ginger hair and sunken blue eyes.

"Hello," croaked Ace warily. "I'm Ace."

He was scared as hell, but he kept glancing down at her hand.

"Is this yours?" she said. There was no answer, so she raised her hand and the ball tumbled away down the slope.

The kid grabbed it. He stared at her for a second and then turned and ran.

"Thanks a bunch," said Ace. She closed her eyes again and lay for what seemed like a day in a state of half-sleep that at least pushed the worst possibilities of reality away.

When she opened her eyes again, it didn't seem to be later at all. The grey twilight was the same. The air was the same. She was still hungry. She scrambled slowly out of the hole and looked at her surroundings.

She was at one end of a narrow alley, perched halfway up a mound of rubble. The grey remains of a part-collapsed building reared over her. Its interior was revealed in jagged cross-section, but there were no rooms or levels inside. It was a hollow shell or fascia. All grey with false windows and balconies applied to the outside, but leading nowhere.

Ornate moulded shapes like the outlines in a kid's colouring book waiting to be painted in.

The building on the other side, which was undamaged, more or less mirrored the shape of the remains of the collapsed building. A matching pair once, they inclined towards each other as they went higher, until they almost touched at their roofs.

Through the gap overhead, she saw a sprinkling of coloured stars, one of which, a gold sodium giant, was bright enough to cast a shadow in the grey twilight.

Ace walked to the end of the alley and looked cautiously out on to the main street. The place was deserted. Other buildings or fasciae lined the curving thoroughfare. There was nothing symmetrical to their layout. They were slung together in a silent cacophony of muddled styles, as if a number of drunken architects had pooled their ideas together and this was the result.

It was weird and wonderful. Archways and overwalks tangled with pillars and balustrades. Roofs and towers in disparate sculpted forms rose up on all sides around her, fading into the distance, as if she was standing at the foot of a basin or valley. A giant might have tilted the ground so that the buildings slid together in a teetering jumble and

were left where they had collided. Stone in the form of birds' wings and curlicues. Geometric shapes like carved fruit and prisms. Vast astragals without their columns. An edifice like the prow of a beached ship.

All of them grey. Many of them crumbling or tumbledown. Rubble lay strewn in piles where it had fallen and no one had cleared it away. And there was a bizarre scattering of furniture too. An iron bedstead was emerging sideways through the brickwork about fifteen feet up a wall.

A mirror with a carved oval frame hung on another wall, its glass splintered. Through its cracks grew the branches of a white tree.

The place's craziness was difficult to take in. Harder still to look at. The way it piled up around Ace was oppressive, even dizzying. She was right at its centre. The City around her dwarfed the sky overhead.

But what a sky. There was no sky like this anywhere near Earth. The constellations seen from Earth were miserable and pale. These stars were fierce like warriors.

They burned in red, blue or white, green, purple or gold. A nebula of interstellar gases splashed the sky directly overhead, diffused with smoky blue and pink from the distant torches of the stars around it.

Ace was dazzled by this. It was exactly the sort of thing she had wanted the Doctor to show her. Well cosmic. As a kid she had looked up at the night sky, dull in the glare of the street lamps, and said, "Listen God, if you want to prove you exist, show me what it's like on another planet. I want to dream it tonight OK? Then I'll know you're really real."

She never dreamt it, but God might've just been playing hard to get. And now the Doctor had gone too. So it was up to her.

"You're on your own again, Ace," said God.

"Thanks for that, God. Cheers."

She knew there were others in the City. Tramps and scavengers probably. No one else would stay in this derelict bombsite. If the Doctor was here, he would have made contact with them. By now he would either be established as their new leader or be top of their Most Wanted Person list.

She could guess which side she'd land up on. She had nothing to eat and nothing to protect herself with. And she had a hell of a reputation to live up to. Everything she owned had been in the TARDIS. But what she missed most was her nitro-nine. She couldn't even guard her own back without that.

She plunged her hands through her pockets and produced two leaky biros and a packet of fluffy mints. She scraped one of the sweets off and chewed it. At least it felt like eating.

In an inside pocket she found the TARDIS key and the scroll. She had forgotten about them. But they were no good to anyone now. And only the Doctor could know what the scroll was for. That was something else she'd screwed up over. It was all her fault. She should have found him and handed over the scroll when he could have done something with it.

An involuntary shudder coursed down her spine. The street was no longer silent. She heard a choking wheeze close by and ducked back up the alley.

Something was approaching. The desperate gasp of air was followed by a dull slithering squelch and then a venomous reptilian hiss.

Wheeze. Squelch. Hiss.

The pattern slowly repeated itself again and again as its author drew steadily nearer.

Wheeze. Squish. Ssss.

Ace pushed herself into a doorway, but the handle was false and wouldn't budge. There was no time to run and she was too scared to move. What was coming was a horror.

Something massively vile and evil, heaving its effortful way along the deserted street towards her alley.

The progress stopped. Ace felt faint. Her stomach gurgled like a megawatt sound system. She leaned forward slightly, hearing the short gasping breaths of the creature as it lingered just out of her sight. There was a stench like rotting potatoes.

Hiss. Rasp. Sludge.

It moved on again. Ace pressed herself flat into the recess and stared

at the opening. The monster's star shadow lurched across the mouth of the alley. She turned her face away, eyes screwed tight, teeth clenched, dreading the worst.

It was right there in the opening. Then the repulsive sounds passed on, gradually fading as their owner moved away. The stench slowly dispersed. Ace breathed again.

What you smell you eat, a memory reminded her. She lost her appetite. Minutes counted on her racing heart before she dared edge out of the doorway. The same numbing silence had returned. She made her way to the alley mouth and looked out.

The street was empty again. She stepped forward and knelt on the road. A feeling of sickness which had started in the pit of her empty stomach was welling up into her throat.

Along the dusty ground, just as she had feared, ran a line of single oval footprints, layered in glistening slime. She had seen the same tracks before, leading from the back of the Doctor's splintered chest of books into the crack in the TARDIS walls.

It was the same creature, somehow transported here just as she had been. Only here, in this desolate City, it was leaving tracks a hundred times bigger.

8: The Hollow Hand

miehrrvre (me-air-rr-vra) *a.* (vulgar) No true Earth equivalent. Implies: no weather; no change; no development; held in stasis; in limbo. (Low Orculqui, from *mevrilakis* nullity, *iehrr* highly objectionable) *New Oxbridge Dictionary of Offworld Colloquialisms* The Phazels waited by the Wall of Clouds. Captain Pekkary stared into the dark arcade which led to the haunted section of the City. The translucent glass that had once made up the canopy was long since shattered, leaving only a harsh iron grid through which the stars shone.

Beyond its rows of crumbling columns, the arcade opened on a wide, domed atrium. From the broken canopy of iron hung a huge stone hand. The cold, grey hand of a giant or a titan, with no body to belong to, slung in a net of rusting cable attached to the grid by a single-line

cord. "Out of arm's way," Shonnzi had once said with his childish giggle, but the others had just looked at him, confused. The hand's massive grey palm faced down, its three fingers extended in a gesture of protection or blessing. The nails had turned bruised black with age. Through the centre of the palm, the sculptor had smoothed a wide, round hole. The benediction became a gaping gesture of emptiness. The Phazels called it the Hand of Osuda, the hollow hand of Fate.

Pekkary waited with the others for the cracked chimes that signified the start of the bellday. He was used to being hungry, but today he was famished. Shonnzi brought them what food he could find and there was a store that Pekkary had hidden away for emergencies. He did not want that touched yet, but it might have to be soon. They had eaten nothing for two belldays and their defiance of the Process couldn't last for long.

They were already weak. The monster, who could probably last out for ever, had only to wait. But their stand must be made, it was a matter of principle, so they might not eat again for a long time.

While they waited, they cracked open the white twigs of an overroot that had grown into a wall, sending cracks like hairline branches across the surface. The twigs were empty.

If the thing they searched for had once been there, it had long since passed on.

There was no way they could avoid the work; the mirror-eyed God of Fate had decreed that when he consigned them to this place. But if they must suffer, Pekkary would ensure that their persecutors suffered with them.

Amnoni Distuyssor kicked up the dust at the arcade entrance. There was no breeze, but the air from beyond the passage was dank and threatening. Or was it their imagination? "It's like a trigger," she said. "Cross the line and it's like disturbing sacred ground."

"Those cries again," said Chesperl. She turned away distressed and looked for Reogus. He had not returned from his lookout post, watching for guards on the artery that led from the tower. "They can't force us down there," she said. "I don't want to go down there."

Amnoni shook her head coldly. "We may have no choice."

"We'll see," said Pekkary.

The distant bell clanked its three broken notes out across the rooftops. Another bellday. Another skirmish with the interminable. The bell seemed to echo twice, each an echo of different notes. Once from high among the towers.

Once from through the stars.

They waited long moments in silence until Reogus appeared from a turning along the street and lumbered towards them. "I owe you two treazants, Pekkary," he said.

"They've been to the square first. You were right to say they would."

"Vael doesn't trust us," said Amnoni.

"Or hoped we were bluffing," added Pekkary with a grim satisfaction.

As Vael approached along the artery, Chesperl moved in beside Reogus and squeezed his hand. Two guards, the usual quota for a work crew, chittered to each other in Vael's wake. But for the moment, they kept their distance.

Vael stopped before he reached the Phazel group and eyed them with distaste. No swagger today. His jacket was still torn at the shoulder, but the cord had been cut away.

Pekkary stepped forward. "Well? Does the Process send us its greetings?" he mocked.

"You're lucky," said Vael. "The Process was angry when it heard your demands. But I dissuaded it from making a more aggressive response."

"Meaning what?"

"I wouldn't like to find out. It was very angry. As it is, just be grateful there's no change to its original decree. It wants that section of the City searched."

"He didn't even tell it," muttered Reogus. "Too scared of going in there himself."

"Reogus Teleem," reprimanded the Captain.

Vael's smile had grown a frozen curl. "Do you want to argue with the Process, Reogus? Please, go ahead. Let's see where your diplomatic prowess gets you."

Reogus scowled. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? But I'd find a way to beat it. And you'd be the first to suffer!" He pushed away Chesperl's quietening hand in anger.

"We know where we all stand," Vael continued. "It could have been much worse."

"Who for?" interrupted the Captain. He was determined to keep these negotiations on a level basis. "You know our terms, Vael. They haven't changed either."

Vael's head ticked with nervous anger. "There will be no food until you work."

Pekkary glanced at the rest of the group. "It can't afford to let us die," he said.

Vael looked round at the two guards. "You won't," he said, and it was more than a threat.

The two creatures moved forward, chittering as they came. Their shiny rust-red beetle heads sat immovable on their spindly biped bodies, human parodies encrusted with growths like scabrous armour. Only their eyes twitched, clusters of twelve red optic nodules set on either side of each head. In their claws they gripped their coiled whips.

The Phazels quailed before the inhuman menace that they exuded. Impassive embodiments of Vael's own cruelty.

Or the creature they were all forced to serve.

Looking past them, Amnoni fancied she saw something move on the corner of an alley. A small shadow that darted for cover into a doorway. She found herself praying that Shonnzi would not try anything foolish.

"I'll settle this nonsense," said Vael. He walked slowly towards the arcade entrance, staring into its gloomy depths as he advanced. "There's nothing evil in there. No curse. It was driven out long ago."

Under the first arch he stopped and turned to the guards. "Inside," he instructed.

The guards chittered and moved forward.

Under threat, the Phazel crew shrank together, but the creatures marched steadily past. They advanced on Vael, who stood aside to let them through.

Into the forbidden arcade they went, across Amnoni's trigger line, crunching through the fallen glass and rubble, violating the shadows, kicking up a haze of dust as they moved.

"Stop," called Vael.

The guards halted and waited. Dust settled on their twitching eyes. Above them, the massive stone hand hung from the domed grid of the atrium like a marble cloud.

Silence.

Vael stood at the entrance, smirking at the Phazels.

"Nothing," he scoffed. "Nothing there."

"Now you," said Reogus.

"Why not?" Vael spread his hands in a gesture of sneering confidence and walked into the arcade. The regular shadows of the grid flowed over his shape as he receded.

"Still nothing," he shouted as he went. "What were you afraid of? Shadows?"

Pekkary felt the sudden cold chill of presentiment that they still sometimes shared. He turned and saw that the others felt it too.

"Idiot!" yelled Reogus after Vael. "Don't disturb it!" He started to run into the arcade.

"Reogus!" Chesperl was already moving after him.

Pekkary made to grab at her, but found that Amnoni was also running. "Get back!" he shouted and followed the others.

Through the line of shadow arches they ran, their footsteps echoing against the walls like gun fire. Behind them, the dark figure slid around the corner of the first arch and stared after them.

Reogus reached the wide circle of the atrium and launched himself at Vael, lifting the slight young man right off his feet.

The first guard, squealing horribly, dragged Reogus back with one claw and threw him to the ground. The second raised its scorpion whip, but Chesperl hurled herself onto its back. They staggered together in an insane, grotesque dance.

"Stop!" yelled Pekkary. "Get out of here!" He grabbed at Amnoni, pulling her clear of the first guard's whip. They both scrambled away but lost their footing on the rubble, falling headlong to the ground. The creature loomed over them through the rising dust.

The air froze. Out of the dark passages beyond the atrium rose a scream. A nightmarish wail of misery or agony that cut at their very thoughts. A single, thin, blood-curdled lament of doom to come.

In the silence that followed as if the world itself was shocked, the Phazels and their tormentors stared about them, half horrified at their conflict.

They heard a slow creak from above. The great hand had started to sway in its net on its cord. It moved slowly at first, turning on the start of a growing spiral. A rain of rust and glass splinters began to fall from the trembling grid of the dome. The Phazels crawled to the edges of the atrium, gazing helplessly up at the searching hand of Fate.

The little figure that crouched in the arcade watched fascinated as the iron cord sang and thrummed its scything path through the air.

"Well wicked," she whispered.

A hand clamped over her mouth and dragged her backwards. The walls and ground had begun to shudder under the great hand's inexorably widening spiral. The terrified Phazels clung to the quaking floor, cowering at each pass of the vast circling instrument. Where would it rest?

Who would it crush? Above them, the stone fingers massively churned the air as it flew.

The air rumbled with storm. Out of the darkness beyond the atrium came the apparition. A dark figure, robed and collared, sweeping across the floor beneath the turning stone. Its features hidden in shadow. A walking spirit that answered the disturbance of its shrine with baleful horror.

The Phazels hid their faces before it.

With a crack like thunder, the iron cord snapped. The apparition was gone. The great hollow hand turned sidelong in its flight and fell, crashing to the ground. Two of its grey fingers smashed and tumbled across the area.

Vael clung to the wall, unable to move through sheer terror. The other Phazels were rising from their places and running from the arcade. The guards stared around them, chittering in bewilderment.

The third finger remained on the shattered hand of Fate.

It was extended out, pointing in accusation at Vael, the traitor and collaborator.

9: Telling Tales

A relentless chittering sounded across the decaying city like an alarm.

"Along here." Ace found herself being forced off the open street into a shadowy passage. She was too faint with hunger to resist. "Keep going." She ran, or staggered, because the figure she was with had a tight grip on her arm.

"Let go, will you?"

"I'm protecting you." He brought her up abruptly beside a bare wall.

"Now where?" she said, supporting herself against the wall.

"Up there." He pointed to a porthole about ten feet up the wall's surface.

"You're joking." She looked at him for a moment, the first real chance she'd had.

He was about her age, maybe a big younger. Thin-faced with fierce blue-green eyes, he had a dusty blue bandanna wound tightly round his head like a pirate. Planted on top of it was a battered straw hat that was almost falling apart. The other people Ace had seen were wearing ragged and heavy coats. He wore a grubby medieval-style tunic of what might once have been red velvet. But it was hard with age now and ripped in a couple of places. If this was what passed for street cred round here, she didn't think much of the streets.

"Go on, beanbag," he grinned. "Get up there."

"Why?" she complained. "I'm not Spiderman."

"It's dangerous out here. If we get caught, you can do the talking."

"I gathered that."

For some reason, either the effects of hunger or just this crazy place, she half expected a flight of stone steps instantly to appear, or a spiral staircase to wind its way out of the ground like a corkscrew. A ladder at least. There was no point in hanging around being patronized by God's gift to the hippie movement. She thought about making a run for it.

"Who says I'm better off with you?" she said. "How do I know what you're dragging me into?"

He was glancing round for possible danger. "Tell you later."

"Like hell." She just wanted to curl up and be alone with her empty stomach.

"Stop arguing, Ace!" he exploded. "Now go on up there.

Use the handholds."

She couldn't believe it. "Who told you my name?"

"Up!"

She decided to stay. Somewhere she found another pocket of strength to draw on. There were ribs and cracks in the surface for her hands and feet to grip and she began to haul her way up. "No!" she said sharply as she felt his supportive hands on her legs.

She reached the porthole and pushed against it. It gave in and she fell through with a yell, head first into the dark, tumbling down on to a stack of old clothes that had obviously been put there deliberately. She just lay on the heap. The porthole above clattered back on its hinge like a letterbox.

Seconds later, he clambered through and landed amongst the clothes next to her.

She looked across at him. There was just enough light filtering from the porthole to make him out, but not much else.

"Wait there, clumsy," he said and disappeared into a shadow.

Who's moving? she thought, but that was all she could manage. She slid into a woozy darkness for a moment or an hour or a hundred years.

"Come on, beanbag. Eat this." He was shaking her gently awake.

Still half asleep, she picked the biscuit out of his hand and chewed on it. Even that was an effort. It tasted like sawdust mixed with sweet bacon fat. But she'd eat anything.

Strangely, she felt a feeling-better feeling creeping through her almost immediately.

He passed her a leather sachet of tasteless water. As she swigged at it he studied her carefully. "Hello," he grinned, tilting his hat at a stupid angle. "I'm Shonnzi and you're called Ace."

Her instinct was to get very angry, but she curbed it and said, "How do you know that?"

He shrugged. "Rumour gets around."

"Rumour? What rumour?"

"About names. They're just words, aren't they? They travel fast. Not like real people. People take longer. That's why we had to wait." He glanced round at things that she couldn't see in the darkness. Then he gave her another biscuit. It tasted of fruit cake.

There's only one way you could know, she thought. Only one person who could have told you about me. A sense of relief swamped her. "Where is he?" she said.

Shonnzi went quiet. Even under the shadow cast by the brim of his hat, she could tell that he was frowning. "He...

went away," he said with a niceness that was uncomfortable.

"What? What do you mean? When did he go away?

Why didn't he wait?"

He turned and vanished into the shadow again.

"Oi," she yelled and it echoed.

"I'm here," said his voice. "Keep the noise down."

A flame lit. A golden light from something like a small silver candle that he was holding up in front of him. In its tiny glow she saw part of the cavernous shape of the building's inner shell. It was stacked as far as the light went with piles of dusty gear and rubbish like a junk shop.

Shonnzi came back with the light and sat by her. The flame lit one side of his face, casting the other half into darkness. "It's difficult to explain," he said.

"Well, when's he coming back? When can I see him?"

She knew he wouldn't be far away. The fact that the other creature from the TARDIS was here only confirmed it.

"It was a long time ago."

"How long? It can't be that long. What are you hiding?"

Fresh worries had begun to force themselves into her thoughts. Very carefully she said, "We are talking about the Doctor, aren't we?"

The light guttered out. There was no reply.

"Shonnzi? Are we talking about the Doctor?"

"Yes." He sounded almost reluctant.

"Well, thank God for that."

"It gets hot. The light."

"Is the Doctor all right?"

Shonnzi sighed. "We'll stay here. The others won't be long."

"What about the Doctor?"

"You never stop asking questions," he retaliated. "Just wait, will you? It's been a long time. And when the grumblies get here, let me do the talking."

Ace flopped back on to the musty clothes, too tired to argue. "Will they know?" she asked. "Is it safe?"

"Nothing's *safe*."

"I just want to know what's going on."

His eyes flickered in the pool of starlight from the porthole. "Come on, Ace," he said quietly. "I thought you'd tell us that."

Vael slipped into a side alley. The arteries were deserted.

The Phazels had gone. And so had he. Now what?

The guards were still in the atrium. Their high insect voices fluting and twittering urgent messages back and forth from the Watch Tower. Instructions from the Process.

Vael was shaking with what he had seen. The dark apparition. The accusing finger pinning him down. Like a questioning eye, another riddle from the Sphinx.

" *Who is to blame?* "

An alarm bell was clanging out its threat. More guards were leaving the Tower. He had no choice and no time. Find the Phazels before the guards do. Or there'd be a drastic drop in the population, starting with him.

He could guess where they had gone. He cut a path down the grey alleys and passages that led towards the banks of the mercury stream. That sector was quiet, often shrouded in the smoky fog that drifted across from the next City. He had long suspected that was where Shonnzi had hidden himself. He decided that he would not face the Process again until he had Shonnzi scrabbling like a cat in a net.

Halfway across a grey courtyard surrounded by thin curving pillars like grey crescent planets, he saw footprints in the dust. With no rain to wash them out and no wind to grind them down, they could have been laid an eternity ago. Vael had a memory of soft rain falling in the summer at somewhere he half remembered as a different home. He had hated it. But he still recalled the fresh green smell of the pasture fields after the rain. In the dead City, only the fall of fresh dust could smother the footprints away. He hated that more.

These footprints had a fresh silvered glint. They led off between two monolithic slabs of tilting stone that supported a massive dodecahedron on their summit like the cinder of a fallen star.

As Vael ducked under the arch, an armoured claw caught his arm and pinned him to the stone. He stared up at the quivering mass of red eyes on the guard's brutal head.

The sharp mandibles like a beak marked it out as the Guard Captain itself.

A voice half croaked, half whispered with a parched guttural hatred. Like dust talking. It was the voice of the Process. The Captain was merely its instrument.

"No searching. The Phazels, why are they not searching?"

Vael choked with fright. He struggled to recover the fawning manner he reserved for dealing with his monstrous master. "Thank you for finding me. I was trying to warn you.

There's something in that section of the City."

"Shonnzi Phazel."

"No, not this time."

The rough armoured claws were gripping under his arms, sliding him up the wall. His feet kicked out hopelessly for the ground.

"Searching, the Process orders it. Why no searching?"

Even at second hand an encounter with his master filled Vael with nausea. "Talk to the guards. They saw what happened. We need a massive sweep through that section.

Take the whole area apart."

The voice gave a rasping grate of rage. The Captain raised Vael high and flung him into the dust.

"The City, disturbance in all Phases. Dangerous Time shifts. Why?"

Vael began to haul himself up. The Process's temper was worsening. One day it would be death by temper for all of them. "I'll find out. Let me go and I'll find out for you."

The Captain's body twisted with the hatred that flowed through it. It loomed over him, black against the starfield overhead. "You are forfeit. A need no longer."

This was the dismissal he had dreaded. "I'll find Shonnzi too. I swear it!"

"The Future? Find that too?" Even in the harsh croaking there was a note of sarcasm.

"Yes. Yes!"

"Not so far."

"Then I'll find it now."

"Now! It is always *Now*." The Captain's eyelet clusters spread wide, each optic nodule moving by itself to catch every detail of its surroundings, like two water anemones clinging to the sides of a polished rock. Even when it screamed, the dry, harsh voice of the Process came like a shouted whisper. And it screamed a lot.

"The World City, in the Beginning the Process makes it all. But Doctor steals the Future. Only Now left. Now, Now disrupts. Pattern changes. The Future, Phazels must find it!"

"You need me to control them."

"You are forfeit. Phazels, they learn to obey the Process."

"No!" protested Vael.

"The stolen Future, it must be found!" The monstrous guard turned and lurched away along the passage.

"Wait!"

But the Process never listened. It just issued impossible instructions and expected results. Vael leant heavily against a carved grey lectern, a bird of prey that struggled in frozen flight halfway out of a wall. He

stared after the Captain with a look of desperation.

Something slipped into his eyeline. He scooped up a stone and flung it in spite at the silver-coated cat that was watching him from a portal. The stone's impact flung up a cloud of dust. When that cleared, the creature was gone.

Vael stumbled away in the other direction. He had endured the Process's rages before. But how could he survive outside the monster's service? He was getting angry.

Nor could the Process survive without him. There were ways to regain its favours. His position would be restored once he brought the monster Shonnzi.

Ace could hear Shonnzi's voice. She had been woken by the sound of an argument carried on in hoarse whispers. It was still dark and it took moments to remember where she was.

Someone, Shonnzi she supposed, had laid a long heavy coat over her to keep her warm.

"Of course there's a reason for it, stupid! It's an occasion. Isn't that when you're supposed to celebrate?" His voice came from a little way off.

Another man's voice, older and deeper, but equally agitated, came in response. "This food is for emergencies.

You had no right to break it out."

"It was me that got it for you in the first place," muttered Shonnzi. "I'll get you more... if you need it."

A woman's voice cut in, this one more gentle. "I don't understand what we have to celebrate anyway. And I can't wear that."

"Why do you always have to be so boring?" Shonnzi complained.

"It's one of his games," said another, less stuffy male voice. "Not a good time for that now, Shonnzi. Big trouble outside. Nothing to dress up for. Another time, eh?"

"Surely we're not going to stay here?" added a second female, more cultured than the first. "There could be guards at any moment."

"You're all going to enjoy yourselves!" came Shonnzi's voice through

clenched teeth. "Stupid grumblies. Now who wants another biscuit?"

Ace turned over on her musty bed. A panelled silk screen blocked off the rest of the hall. Or rather, blocked her in. There was a candle flame glowing on the other side which cast shadows on to the screen's surface.

"Well, I'll have one," said the first, gentler woman. "I want to know what's happened. What exactly are we supposed to be celebrating?" A tall, slender shadow moved across the screen, followed by a bulkier shape.

"Come on, Pekkary," said the friendlier man, "they haven't found us here before. At least let's eat something before we move."

There were moments of movement, when shadows slid back and forth over the silk. Then Shonnzi said, "Pekkary, remind me of what happened in the Beginning."

"This is not the time," complained the second woman.

"Oh, yes it is, Noni," said Shonnzi. "You'll soon see why.

But I was too young to remember it."

Ace sat up. Very clever, Shonnzi, she thought. This is all for my benefit, isn't it? Beside her, she saw that he had left her another biscuit on a white shell that acted as a plate.

There had been silence for a few moments. Then the younger woman said, "We need a tale, Pekkary. We need the same memories to stay as a crew. If not, we're cut adrift from each other."

"I don't remember it well," said Pekkary. "There are changes each time it is told. The truth mingles into the wishes of what might have been."

Ace watched their shadows settle. She bit gently into the biscuit, which tasted like spiced chutney. Get on with it.

Pekkary, she thought. I'm sitting comfortably.

"Once before this time, when we were younger and our thoughts were shared, we flew in a ship between other times and we lived in a different world. The memories of that world are locked away from us, but one day we will find a key to release them.

"Now on one flight our ship was beset by storm and mutiny. It

foundered in the oceans of the infinite. Another ship came upon it and seeing its predicament, sought to capture it as booty.

"In that empty ocean between times, where nothing exists outside thought, the two ships rammed and slid together like passing ghosts. They were shattered and lost, and the crew was pitched into the tumult.

"But the Gods, the Menti Celesti, who know all things, sheltered us from the storm in their cupped hands and we awoke on a new land. There we beheld many wonders and works of great mystery. All this world was a great City where Time flowed strangely and was fed by many tributaries. It is the terrible world of future legends where people meet their memories, and the full of their lives is spread before them. In this place, our thoughts were turned in on themselves and were no longer shared. Each one's thoughts were his alone and we despaired."

There was another long silence as the shadows sat unmoving, wrapped in the general gloom.

"That's not the end," complained Shonnzi. "What about the last bit?"

"It's not a *bit*," said Pekkary. "It's a stanza."

The bulkiest shadow leaned forward and stretched out its arm.

"Reogus Teleem," said the tall shadow of the older woman, "that is your second biscuit."

"He's hungry," said the younger woman" s voice.

They sat and waited. For a moment, Ace imagined she heard the muffled chittering of insect voices. Then Captain Pekkary began again.

"Now the Process that created this world had a cold, dark heart and sought to enslave us. For the cruel Doctor, who was Captain of that other ship, had, by some caprice of the Gods, also come to this world. And by his arts, he had stolen the Future from the Process. There is only Now."

"Now, there is only Now," interrupted Reogus, his mouth full. "You forgot."

"And other details have changed as well," added the younger woman.

Ace saw Pekkary's shadow shift uneasily as he continued.

"The Process fought a great battle with this Doctor and swept him away. But nowhere could it find the stolen Future.

It was angry and sought to exact its rage on others.

"Amongst us there was one whose thoughts grew darker. He betrayed us to the Process in exchange for his own freedom. And now we are the monster's slaves.

Trapped for ever until the Future is found and we remember."

He paused for a moment and then their voices all intoned, "The tale goes no further. It awaits its ending."

"And you've got most of it wrong," said Ace as she emerged from behind the screen.

10: Daleks Don't Like Finger Biscuits

A cry of rage echoes through the portals of the Watch Tower. Strings of slimy gossamer sing as the shriek plucks at them.

Here, where all the time threads of the City are woven in a plexus, it feels the disturbance. A tremor on the strings in its mind, like the spinning dance of fly trapped in a web.

A missing heartbeat. A lost rattle. The pattern of Time that it plans is disrupted. A stormquake. A dark apparition.

The steady, seeping drip of the natural flow suddenly trickles into an alternative course. Hatred, like needles, goads the desires and urges that pass for its thoughts.

There is only here and now, but its future must be secure. Vael Phazel, its long-term emissary, is no longer a need. One hundred and forty-four other eyes search the arteries of its world. Seek out the disruption, smash the alternative. Just as it destroyed the Doctor long ago — in the Beginning, when it is the Process that creates the world.

Ace was less surprised by the look she got, more by the length of time it lasted. "Dear Gods," was all one of them, the older woman, could manage.

They stared at her in apparent disbelief. The heavy man, Reogus, slid sideways towards the other younger woman and fumbled to take her hand, like a frightened child seeking reassurance from its mother. "Chesperl," he said.

She was even taller than he was, with a kind but careworn face. But then both the women were taller than the men.

Go on then, thought Ace. This is it. The Doctor always catches them on the hop. Don't give them a chance to think.

"Hello, I'm Ace," she said with a forced grin, and nearly added, "and this is the Doctor", but stopped herself just in time.

Silence.

Close to, they were weirder than she had imagined.

Each of them caught in the half-shadows cast by the single candle flame. They couldn't have been born into poverty.

Their accents had given that away. So their general squalor had been descended into, as if they had given up bothering.

Their long hair fell past their shoulders in greasy filaments.

Their faces were thin and drawn with sallow skin, but there were no traces of beards on the men. The great coats and overalls they wore were torn and filthy. Yet a pile of other clothes, evidently second-hand, lay neglected beside them.

All around was the collection of dusty relics and antiques that made the place resemble a long-lost car boot sale.

"Well, say something," said Ace, and she suddenly felt a renewed need to have a long bath.

Shonnzi, his face tight with restrained emotion, moved in beside Ace. "You could have waited," he muttered and turned back to the others. "All right, grumblies," he announced with a flourish. "This is Ace. Remember?" It was as if he was turning a knife. "This is why we should be celebrating."

"Why is *she* here?" Pekkary's voice was dulled with shock. He pulled the loose hair down over one side of his face. "Why has she come back?"

"Because something's happening, you stuffy old goiks,"

sneered Shonnzi. "Something new. Come on, wake up, grannies. Throw away your sticks. Things are changing at last."

"No," intoned Pekkary. Fear was taking over from shock, but nothing overlaid his general air of weariness. He turned to the older woman. "It's the same thing, Amnoni. It's come back to us again."

Amnoni stepped closer to Ace, staring at her as if she were a laboratory specimen. Despite her filthy appearance, the woman maintained a dignity that suggested rank. "We should never have gone to that section, I said that. I knew we would disturb things. First the apparition. Now this."

"Yeah, punch me and I squeak," snapped Ace. "Since you know all about the Doctor, you'd better tell me where he is, all right? I'm a friend of his."

"It's the same," despaired Pekkary. "Just as before." He turned away, shaking his head.

"What are they on about?" said Ace to Shonnzi. "It's not true. What they said in the story."

Shonnzi shrugged. "If that's what they say happened. I was too young to understand properly."

"What do you mean, too young? How long ago was it?"

"How long?" interrupted Amnoni, puzzled. "Does she mean, how far?"

"It was in the Beginning," said Pekkary, turning back to Ace. "On the first Phase, when Shonnzi was still a youngster."

"Daft goik, I'm not that old," snapped Shonnzi.

Ace felt something like emotional vertigo. Time storms and Timewyrms. Always time playing its tricks on her. "How long? Five years? Ten?" How long had she been tombed up in those rocks? How old was she now? She didn't dare look in a mirror. "What about the Doctor? Where's he gone? I want to know what happened."

The other two figures, Reogus and Chesperl, still clung nervously to each other, watching Ace without a word.

Pekkary sighed. "We knew this would happen. You warned us that you

would return."

"What? I've never seen you before in my life," exploded Ace. "I just want to find the Doctor."

Shonnzi touched her arm gently. "Did you listen to the story, or what?"

"How should I know what it means?"

He looked angry. "You must know. You said it wasn't true."

She grasped at what he meant. "That's right. The Doctor wouldn't attack you. You got it wrong."

"Yes?" Only Shonnzi encouraged her. The rest of the audience viewed her with cold impassivity.

"I saw you. I remember. Just as the TARDIS exploded, I saw you. It was your ship. Sliding through the walls like ghosts. And you saw us too, you must have done. The ships must have crashed."

"You see," exclaimed Shonnzi, "Ace has the answers.

She can help us break out of this."

Pekkary and Amnoni exchanged glances.

"It wasn't deliberate," Ace added.

"Tell us where the Doctor hid the Future," said Amnoni.

Ace wondered why she wasn't fazed by this question, but then anything was possible with the Doctor. He was capable of losing things often enough. His keys, his memory and his temper. Why shouldn't he hide things as well? Even impossible things like the Future. "Why should I tell you?"

she said.

Reogus suddenly lurched out of his position towards her. His every gesture seemed to burst with energy. Ace thought he would crush her in his bare hands. "Because the Process has driven us without mercy to find it! All this time, working like slaves, because of you!"

"Reogus Teleem!" asserted Pekkary. For a moment, the hair fell away from his face. Ace saw the red weal on his cheek and an eye like a

blank white marble in its socket.

Reogus drew grudgingly back. "I'll make her tell us," he said.

Ace couldn't help laughing. "Tell you how to find the Future? You're all flutters. You're crazy," she scorned. "And whatever you say about the Doctor, it isn't true. All I care about is finding him. Even if it's ten years since you saw him, he can't have gone far. He must still be on this stupid planet.

He can't leave without the TARDIS."

"None of us can leave," said Amnoni.

Ace turned to Shonnzi. "Where do I start looking? You'd better tell me about this Process thing. Do I go and talk to that?"

"Going out there alone is stupid," he said. "Too dangerous. And we need you here. There are so many questions **to** answer."

"What's the point when they don't believe me anyway?"

"I do. And they will. Trust me, Ace. Just one question."

Ace sighed. "If it means that much to you."

"Yes, it does."

If nothing else, he was persistent. But she wasn't going to let him have it all his own way. "Only if I get another of those biscuit things," she said.

The group glanced at each other. "Hospitality," said Pekkary and nodded.

"Thanks," said Ace and managed to palm two. Shonnzi looked at her with an intensity that said: get this right Ace, or we've both had it. She almost felt she liked him, apart from his stupid hat.

"Go on then," she said.

"In the story he told, the Captain said we came from another world before we were wrecked on this one."

"Yeah?" She guessed what was coming. She glanced at the others and saw how they stared at Shonnzi with an affection that was almost parental. Somehow everything they were depended on this one

question.

There was a hint of irritation in his voice. "They cannot remember what that world is called."

She took it as calmly as she could and tried to think it through. "You're time travellers, yeah?"

Shonnzi nodded. "They think we might have been."

Ace thumbed through her brain trying to avoid the obvious answer. Don't ask me, she thought. I'm just boring old Dorothy from Perivale. What do I know about it?

Their eyes were grilling her alive.

No, you're not. You're Ace. And you know the answer.

The only other solution she could think of was impossible — Daleks didn't and never, ever had eaten crunchy brown finger biscuits. "It's Gallifrey," she said.

There was something like a deep sigh. Amnoni lowered her eyes, while Pekkary stood frozen and unmoving. Reogus turned his heavy frame away, his shoulders visibly shaking.

"It's true. It's true," he was saying, his voice filling with tears.

"Gallifrey. How did we forget?"

Chesperl embraced him tightly, and she was weeping too.

There was a gentle repeated murmur. "Gallifrey, Gallifrey, Gallifrey", as they committed the long-lost name of their home planet to memory. Each in turn stepped forward and touched Ace's head as if in wonder.

"Well done, Ace," whispered Shonnzi. "Surely you'll stay now.

She kept quiet as they stood and watched the others intoning their new litany.

"So you're all Time Lords," she said awkwardly. "Just like the Doctor."

The chant stopped. "Time Lords?" said Captain Pekkary. "Who are they?"

Amnoni turned suddenly and stared into the darkness of the cluttered hail. "Guards! They've found us!"

There was a distant chittering from outside. Crash.

Something boomed against a door like a battering ram.

"Get out, Shonnzi!" hissed Pekkary. "They're after her."

"They don't even know she's here!" retaliated Shonnzi.

He pulled Ace towards the window. "Come on. Out the way we came."

"No!" insisted Reogus and grabbed at Ace's arm.

"Get off me, musclehead!" she shouted.

Crash. Wood was beginning to splinter.

Shonnzi scrambled to free Ace. "Not again, Reogus!

Didn't you learn that last time?"

Chesperl darted between them, pushing them apart.

"No, Reogus. They must go. Please let them go."

Ace pulled free.

"Why did she tell us?" Reogus kept repeating as Shonnzi helped Ace up towards the porthole window. "It should have stayed forgotten."

Ace clung to the ledge and looked out into the alley below. "OK. All clear."

She heard Captain Pekkary say "Go on, Shonnzi. I'll hold them off," before she slipped out and dropped clumsily to the dusty ground. As Shonnzi slid down behind her, they heard a final crash from inside.

"Which way?" she said.

"Wait."

There were shouts from inside and Chesperl screamed.

Then came the crack of a whip and silence.

"That's why you don't want to speak to the Process,"

hissed Shonnzi. "This way!" He took her hand and they ran along the alley into the depths of the City.

Vael watched them from the columned gallery above. The appearance of the strange girl frightened him. He had seen her once before, in a half-remembered nightmare. Her face leaning in over him, upside down like an examining doctor.

Her head framed by a lattice of iron bars.

"So that's the dream," he muttered aloud. But it wasn't quite right. The vision remained an enigma, like the prophesies in the Pythian Book of Future Legends at home on Gallifrey. And every so often one was fulfilled and there was great rejoicing among the idiot populace, who didn't recognize clever politics when it hit them in the face.

He still remembered home. Even if the others had forgotten. And he guessed who the girl was as well. Another remnant of the Past that the Process would be grateful to him to get its vile, slobbering footjaws around. Her name was Ace and her appearance came too soon after the disturbance in the haunted sector to be a coincidence.

And the finger on the fallen hand. It wasn't accusing him at all. He'd been foolish to imagine that. It was singling him out as a chosen one — the something special he had always known that he was.

He chewed on a biscuit and smiled. The Process was soon going to have trouble, and no one else could extricate the monster. The biscuit bored him, so he crumbled the rest over the side of the parapet — just making sure the other Phazels didn't find it.

He shinned down a sloping ridge to the ground and followed the tracks in the dust along the alley. The chittering of the guards inside the building was relentless, but there were no more cries from the Phazels. Without him, the Process would assert its law by brutality. So let's see how far that got it before things or people got broken.

When he reached the sloping marble of the Dial Square, he stood puzzled for a moment. The silvered tracks led back towards the haunted sector. Vael cursed angrily and faltered at the street mouth. It was the one place he did not want to go.

"They're not following," said Ace.

Shonnzi glanced behind them. "They're busy."

She leant against a doorway. Across the street, the opposite wall was painted with moonlit storm clouds. "Can we stop a minute? Are you going to help me find the Doctor or not?"

Shonnzi looked uneasy and mumbled, "We can't stop here."

"I'm not moving until you tell me."

"It isn't easy," he said.

"I want to know, Shonnzi. Did you speak to him? Where was he going?"

Shonnzi grinned. He pulled off the battered grey straw hat and offered it to her. "The daft old goik gave me this."

She stared at the hat. It had been in front of her all this time and she hadn't recognized it. Its brim was coming apart, its crown was full of holes and its patterned band was gone.

But it was the Doctor's hat. The hat that he used to tumble up his arm like a juggler. She took it gently in her hands, weighed it for a moment and then passed it quickly back. She was choked. "You'd better hang on to it. He'd be glad to see it being used," she said.

She kicked aimlessly at the dust. The City loomed vertiginously all around, ready to topple in. Nothing ever seemed to change, wherever you were. The twilight never changed, the air never moved. It was just grey. *Miehrrvre*.

That was the word she wanted. A word she'd picked up from an Orculqui SorbetSlurp rep on Iceworld. It had no Earth equivalent, but its meaning was clear. No weather.

Staleness. No change. Like a tomb.

She took a swig of water from his canteen. "How long have you been here?" she said.

"We don't know. There's only Now here. You'll see."

"But you've seen me before." She was desperate, almost in tears. "I've only just got here."

With a look of anger, he planted the hat back on his head. "Oh, don't start crying. That's typical, just like the others."

He turned away in disgust from her. She boiled over.

Her hand went into a fist and she hit him hard on the back of the neck. Then she ran blind away from him.

Down the rubble-strewn arcade she belted, until she faced the great stone hand in the atrium.

"Doctor! I need you!" she yelled and it echoed back and forth around her.

In the starlight, the remaining finger on the hollow hand pointed towards a dark passage at the back of the area.

"Ace!" Shonnzi was calling after her from the entrance.

"Come back. It's not safe down there!"

A silver shape lay across the passage mouth. When it saw it had Ace's attention, it rolled over, paddling its paws in the air. It was still unreal. Too glossy and smooth like living liquid. Ace moved towards it, but the cat rose and darted into the shadows. Ace followed. Tiny flames flared in alcoves along the passage walls as it passed, like moving through stars. Deeper and deeper. It paused for a moment, waiting for Ace to catch up. Then it darted away and all the flames guttered and went out. Ace was alone in the darkness.

The ground began to tremble and then with a growing roar, to rock. Ace was flung sideways against a wall and down to the floor. Once more, she heard the murderous scream of agony and rage. It was the cry she had heard in the TARDIS, as the monstrous invader had struggled to breach the console room doors.

Ahead of her, a light was growing. Harsh and glutinous, it filled the end of the passage like a cold white sun. Out of its glare came a dark figure. The shape was silhouetted, gliding closer and closer in long heavy robes. A wide circular collar rested on its shoulders, rising high to hide its features.

The ground shook as the spectre drew nearer. The walls creaked ominously like the diaphragm of some aged creature at its last breath. The figure loomed above her, its arm outstretched.

The alcove flames hissed upwards and Ace gasped in shock. The light caught on the sepulchral features of the apparition, eyes staring like one possessed, skin gaunt and shimmering in the glare. It was the

ghost of the Doctor.

11: Figures in the Smoke

Vael felt the tremor in the Dial Square. He lost his footing as the whole concourse heaved up in a wide ripple. Dry dust ran like sand down the undulating peaks, revealing the black lines and patterns inlaid on the white marble beneath. Wide circles and number systems that were meaningless to anyone standing directly on the surface.

He clung to the outside wall where he had been tumbled, watching the unbroken marble flowing with a procession of waves like cloth on the surface of a ripple bath. The buildings on the square were swaying in the tumult. The undulations were moving up through the City as it rose around the steady stars.

He was angry. Events were taking a fresh turn and he was not in on the secret. The tremors had emanated from the haunted sector, where he was too frightened to venture.

He must find out, but to enter that artery mouth was to cross an invisible barrier that his mind's eye could not face.

The quake subsided slowly, settling the square into new shapes, fresh mounds and ditches over which the marble was smoothly draped like raw pastry.

Silence returned, but Vael's mind seethed with anger.

Dust thrown up by the quake thickened the air and choked in his lungs. He stumbled along the edge of the concourse, willing himself to enter the street that he loathed. But he had to find Shonnzi and the girl before the guards stole his chance.

There was a rough alcove set in one of the walls. It had been curtained with ancient material and surrounded by woven twigs and brown flowers, like an altar. On its ledge, the Phazels had placed offerings, old food and gilded trinkets, votive gifts that pleaded for atonement and release from their Gods. But the Menti Celesti were deaf to such pleas, or busy with divine games elsewhere.

How laughable. There was precious food here that was recently offered. After all this time, they still persisted in unshakeable superstition. It made Vael almost blind with rage that he should be

trapped inside this world with these fools. They should be making offerings to him!

If the girl knew a way out of this insane trap, then it should be him that had her — not that brat Shonnzi. It was Vael that the finger pointed at. Vael that the eye inside his own head stared at. Him! Him! Him!

He choked as acrid smoke filled his throat. His sight slammed back into his head and he saw the shrine in flames. Shreds of burning material floated upwards with the smoke. The stone cracked and crumbled in the heat. He had caused it. It was still with him. The hatred in his body could burst out and consume anything in its path. It had erupted for the first time since he was trapped in this tomb. He bit at his own hand, willing and forcing the wild power back under control. He was still an Individual.

There was a loud crack. He looked up. The whole side of the burning building was breaking away and toppling towards him. He didn't move. It couldn't touch him. He was an Individual. The hot rubble arced down, streaming smoke behind it. It crashed to the ground at his feet.

His head was full of eyes inside. His mind's eye. The keening eye of the Sphinx. Loie's accusing eyes. And the watchful, ever wakeful eye of the venerable Pythia.

The noon gong sounded three.

The gloom that had hung over the City like fog during a bitter winter lingered with the arrival of a cold spring. The dourness had become inherent in the people.

The port. The Court of Principals. The Krewva Prospect.

The Pythia flicked through views reflected on to her screen by panoptics throughout the City.

In the market, crowds gathered as a party of fur-clad PenShoza traders displayed fresh consignments of workers from Oshakarm and the Star Grellades. There had been no workers from the Grellades for years. They were prized for their blue-bronze skins and their temperaments. Quick to learn, but utterly and unquestioningly subservient. They were selling well. Abolishing the duties payable on such imports had been a good plan.

A small but vociferous group of protesters was bunched on the street nearby, obstructing the crowds and the unending traffic of litters and palanquins. Council Police were already eyeing the protesters' painted banners. 'FREE

SLAVES AND FREE FOOD.' A year in the suet factories would cure their rebellion.

The neo-technologists were becoming gratifyingly predictable as an opposition. They seized upon any issue to rant and rave, so the Pythia fed them a few tiny morsels now and then, and they went at them with such alacrity that major reforms could be slipped past unheeded. Show them a graffito and they missed the wall it was painted on.

But Gallifrey was still restless. The thoughts of the people had become petty and aimless. Away in the cities of the South, there had been riots and at least two public stonings. How simple it would be for Rassilon's empty promises to catch and turn the mood. Other plans had failed lately. The loss of the Time Scaphe and her agent preyed on the Pythia's thoughts. The auguries of the future had become obscure and uncertain. Yet the Old Order had stood surely for an aeon. It was unthinkable that the Order would crumble. What was needed was a mighty challenge in the Games. A war. Or a legend from the Great Book.

Weary of the bustle in the market, the Pythia elevated the angle of the panoptic so that her screen filled with the cerulean blue of the sky. The morning haze from the still freezing marshlanes had lifted by noon. High in the air, an incoming shuttle from the West Marches glinted in the sunlight.

Deep beneath the Temple, torchlight flickered around the Cavern of Prophecy. Five hundred and seven exalted Pythias had sat in the wicker cage where she sat, slung high above the smoking Crevasse of Memories That Will Be.

There she caught the vapours that lifted her mind into the state of the clairvoyant and the clairaudiant.

She watched the City on the retina screen in the corner of her basket. Other sisters ranged around the rock chamber attended her, robed in the rust-red devotional vestments of the Pythian Order. Her personal Grelladian guard, the un-man Handstrong, waited at the foot of the granite steps leading to the adytum of the Temple above.

Today's petitioners, most of them expecting miracles, had been cleared

from the Temple courtyard. The Pythia prepared to be lowered back to the ground. She fingered the amulets and talismans that hung on gold chains from her robes. One, a jewelled periapt with a tongue of blue ice, slipped through her bony fingers. She cursed and grasped at the thing as it teetered on the wicker frame of her cage. It slid through a gap and fell directly into the unfathomed depths of the crevasse.

A gift to the three hundred and eighty-ninth Pythia from the Legendary Hero Ao, its loss chilled her with a foreboding. She began to count her remaining reliquaries, searching for other losses.

Movement below drew her from her task. A sister, one of the adepts, had entered the Cavern and stood before her.

"Well?"

"Highness, there is a man at the sanctum gate who seeks a private consultation."

The Pythia's screen flicked to a view of the inner Temple. Beside the wrought copper gates barring the innermost chambers stood two figures in fur cloaks, cowled in the pious and correct habit for men who entered the halls of the Gods.

"He is a trader from the South, Highness, with his servant."

"Admit them." Was this what the omen had warned of?

So soon? The Pythia had no hesitation in facing what must be faced.

The other sisters withdrew to their daily tasks.

Handstrong positioned himself in the hollow pillar, where he could overhear and be called in case of danger.

The adept returned quickly, leading the two hooded figures. "Clean let the hearts be of each seeker," she said to them in turn.

"So shall we never doubt," they responded, and the Pythia knew from their tone that they were liars.

"Well, masters," she called from her cage, "how are affairs in the South?"

The trader stepped forward, a small shape who moved with a deliberate reverence which was too knowing, like a performer in the Jagdagian circus. His face was hidden and his servant lingered in the

shadows behind him.

The South is disturbed, Highness, said the trader. His voice was honeyed and obsequious. "I thank you for receiving me unannounced."

"Disturbance is a perception." She had already sent searching tendrils into his mind. As she suspected, it was blocked. "In what do you trade?"

"In anything that needs an advocate, Highness."

She nodded. "Then your business must be thriving.

What could you possibly wish of me?"

"An audience with your Highness is already a great boon and honour."

"And?"

"Some inkling, Highness. Some glimpse of the future."

"The Gods and stars do not deal in trade statistics. I am here as their servant and mouthpiece. I advise and counsel.

And I rule in their name."

"But can you see how long that rule will continue?"

The threat was barely veiled. She fingered a diamond talisman, squeezing it until it bit into the flesh of her hand.

Blood on the jewel. She knew him. She wanted to blast him away for daring to come here. His hood turned slightly and she saw that he heard a warning from his servant.

"Well, *Master Trader from the South*," she declared,

"there are some who publicly reject the mystic faith in favour of a new God of Reason. Or is this a disturbance in my own perception?"

"I have no Gods."

"Save for your own ambition, *Master Trader*," she accused.

"I am told ambition feeds upon itself, *Highness*."

"For those who cannot see their own fate. So beware."

He came closer, having to tilt his head higher. The torchlight fell across the side of his mouth. "What better reason to consult the exalted Pythia herself? Tell me mine, if you can."

She recognized the insult and regarded him in silence.

He must have known that she would see through his conceit.

This was the little man who threatened everything her Order and rule stood for. He was foolhardy to come here, or more dangerous then she had imagined. Why should she do this for him?

The answer was simple. She would look and then confound him with the inevitable future she read. She sent a thought to her attendant adepts. " *I am ready*."

At the touch of a control, a concealed pipe below the lip of the crevasse released a fine spray of water. A blend of steam and smoke began to billow up around the cage.

The Pythia grasped at the wicker struts of the cage, taking gulps of the rich, bitter vapour. Soon, like gauze lifting on the evening breeze, her mind would rise into the canyons of stars and see infinity pricked out like a map on the drum of Time. Again the horror would fill her as the energy of the Gods she served spoke through her frail body. The instrument to dream another's dream.

She waited.

The steam began to choke her.

Her mind stayed earthbound. The vision that never failed eluded her.

"I cannot say," she intoned flatly.

"What?" mocked the figure below. "Where are your powers? Not lost surely?"

The Pythia gasped for breath.

"Shall I tell you then?" he continued. "I foresee the end of your reign, O exalted Pythia. The end of your barbaric line! But not the end of the world. After the demise of the Old Order, I see a bright future. The Gallifreyans, scourged for so long under your yoke, will emerge as the true Lords of Time!"

"Rassilon!" reprimanded the servant in the shadow.

"Remember," her opponent warned, a thrill of power in his voice. "Our secret. I have foretold it!"

He turned to go and was face to face with the massive figure of the guard. Handstrong raised his ceremonial dagger in anger.

"No!" called the Pythia. "Let them go! The game has yet to be played out." She watched the Grelladian stand back in confused obedience, letting the two figures mount the steps and vanish.

Empty. Her mind was dry of thoughts. She could see nothing — only a grey despair that was rapidly turning to darkness.

She sat rocking in her cage as the adepts emerged from their watch-places and stared up at her.

She was alone. Her hands played through her jewels again and again. Alone. And she must know the future. It had been stolen from her. No one could tell her and she could tell no one.

Then she remembered. There was another who was as lost as she was, but he was still in her head. When a situation boils, the scum always rises to the surface. In her despair, she remembered Vael.

"You're on your own now, Ace," said God.

"What did you see?" Shonnzi kept asking.

He had found her crouching in the dark of the tunnel.

Once the place had stopped rocking, he pulled her back out of the shadows. She had gripped his arm and stared at the ground until he sat her quietly behind the cover of the broken hand. "Tea," he said and handed her a biscuit.

Dry and crunchy, it moistened in her mouth and became liquid. It was like no tea she had drunk and it had an aftertaste like orange peel.

"Tell me what you saw," he said gently.

She looked up. Part of the domed grid of the atrium had collapsed. "We can't stay here," she said, her voice trembling.

He knelt beside her. "What did you see?"

"No."

"Ace..." He reached towards her shoulder again and she pushed him away quickly.

"Leave me alone, will you? Just shove off." Every word controlled and clipped.

He turned away, angrily throwing down the hat and pulling off the pirate bandanna. His shock of ginger hair fell past his shoulders in a tangled mass. "Why don't you trust me?"

A cord was pulled tight through her body. She pulled it herself. So tight that none of the emotions were going to get out. There were plenty of reasons for ghosts. Ghosts were memories. They were recorded in people's minds or in the places where something terrible happened. Ghosts didn't have to be people who were...

He waited, watching the arcade through the hole in the stone hand's palm. But she couldn't trust him. She couldn't trust anyone, because then they'd be a friend, and look what happened to her friends.

She felt for another biscuit in her pocket and found the scroll. It weighed almost nothing in her hands. The scroll and the hat. That was all that was left. The cord finally snapped.

"I should have given this to him. If I'd found him none of this would have happened. It's my fault!"

He just looked at her and waited. He reminded her of the Doctor's infuriating habit of making her work things out for herself. She picked up the discarded hat.

"Keep it," he said. "You knew him before I did. You've more right to it."

"You knew what I'd see," she exploded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you had to see for yourself."

"I didn't have to see at all! That way I still had something to hope for." She pushed the hat back at him. "I don't want it.

It's yours.

"But he trusts you, Ace."

She ducked through the hole in the hand and began to walk up the arcade towards the street.

"Trusted," she shouted back at him. "He's gone and I'm on my own. And don't you get ideas about trusting me either."

He began to follow her. "Ace, listen. You can't go.

There's nowhere to go. You don't understand."

"So it's dangerous. Everything's dangerous. Don't waste your time."

They had reached the mouth of the arcade, but she kept walking.

Shonnzi was running sideways to keep up. "He taught me everything I know. It's entrusted with us."

She stopped in her tracks. "Like what?"

He shrugged. "His knowledge. He passed it on."

"Oh, yeah, something else too," she said. "The others didn't remember Gallifrey. But you did, Gingerhead. And you didn't tell them."

"It was a long time ago. And the Doctor told me..."

"You've seen him since," she accused. "Since he was

'swept away'."

"Not like you think Ace."

"You're a mercenary little git."

He smiled sickeningly. "It's the only way to be."

She wanted to hit him, but managed to turn away instead. Then she clocked the guards.

Five of them, approaching down the street, chirruping warning alarms to each other.

"Run!" he yelled.

She started to belt away and heard his call behind her.

He had meant her to go back down the arcade. It was too late now. The guards were dividing into two parties. She saw Shonnzi turn and duck back into the entrance. And then she glimpsed another figure, grey with dust, who she didn't know. He slid out of a doorway and

darted after Shonnzi.

Two guards were almost on him. The other three were heading for her. She ran on her own towards the distant curl in the road. But it was like running on the spot. As if she was going both up and downhill at once.

By instinct, she stooped lower and found it was easier to move. She was taking long strides like a hunter, or a stalking cat. But the guards were still pounding behind her. She had to get off the street.

The grey buildings were clustered closer together now.

Almost tumbling over themselves, even stacked on each other in different styles, like crowds along a race track trying to get a better view.

There was a thin archway, tilted bizarrely as if caught in the crush of buildings. Ace squeezed through it and had to edge along a passage at an angle of forty-five degrees.

She heard the chirruping of the guards as they reached the entrance. One was forcing its effortful way in behind her, but there was twilight ahead. She burst out and thought she was in a forest.

Spindly trees were growing upwards. Or more like the ghosts of trees. There were hundreds of them. Soft, grey, translucent shapes that rose in threadlike trunks and branched out into curling, twisting branches.

The tree nearest her swayed and drifted. Its shape gently dissolved into a pale haze. Ace stepped closer. Each tree in the forest was a line of smoke like the column that spirals up from a snuffed candle. But they were frozen in time, so that their delicate twists and curlicues were caught like sculptures or natural growths.

Behind her, the guard squealed with frustration as it forced its way closer. The others followed it.

Something brushed Ace's leg. The silvered cat again, darting away in tiny steps between the smoke trees. She didn't hesitate to follow. On through the gentle shapes that billowed as she passed, smelling of bonfires and joss sticks.

But the cat did not wait and Ace had to run to keep up.

The angry chittering was fading behind her. And when she turned to

look back, the incredible shapes of the trees had drifted into a blanket of coagulated fog that shielded her from their twitching eyes.

The cat mewled impatiently as it waited amongst the phantom trees. Ace followed it down a rough, dusty slope, but the creature was soon lost. Behind her, the smoky fog was gathering in. Ahead, there was a clearing in the trees. A figure stood there, its features in shadow. Ace recognized the shape, but hardly dared believe it.

She moved closer and slipped, slithering down the bank into the glade. A ripple of air ran through all the trees that surrounded the area. The shapes dissolved into a grey wall that shut out the outside.

The figure was turned away from her, oblivious of her clumsy arrival. But that was typical. The checked trousers and brown jacket were dishevelled, and he somehow had his hat back.

"Professor?" she said from the ground. But she kept any relief or excitement in check. "I thought you were dead."

He didn't move. Only the fingers of one hand tapped out the seconds against his trouser leg. Ace clambered to her feet and moved warily closer. "Doctor?"

He turned towards her. Below his hat, his clean and undamaged hat, his face was a black reflective slab. A digital clock face with a green liquid crystal display that said *11:56*.

"No!" shouted Ace.

A sudden, single gust of air, a shock in this place, caught at the fog and it lifted like a curtain. The phantom went with it.

Ace stood alone at the foot of the slope, confused in the milky light of the nebula overhead. Buildings reared in one direction. A flat bank spread in the other. She crouched down low for some kind of cover.

It had been another sign. She was certain now that he wasn't dead. Somehow, he was trying to reach her and guide her. He might be in trouble or trapped, but the thought reassured her. Nothing he ever did was by the book. But then the book had got eaten, hadn't it? And what about *11:56?* Was that midday or midnight? She could guess. It meant that there wasn't much time left.

Shonnzi said the Doctor trusted her. Which was a laugh, because she couldn't always trust him.

And anyway, she could be wrong.

As it was, she hated Shonnzi. No, not hated; she just didn't understand him and didn't consider it worth bothering.

She walked away across the flat bank. It dropped down to a small river, silver in the grey gloom. The city rose up again on the opposite bank. Another jumble of buildings as far as she could see. The bank was a desolate wasteland, without trees or people. The sort of place polystyrene cups go to die. A water wheel like a huge clock cogwheel was turning on the steam with no visible means of support.

The stream moved sluggishly, turning the lazy wheel with a slow tick. The cogs cascaded with silver droplets that spilled and ran in shimmering globules across the dust. The stream was a mercury flow.

A line of oval mounds stretched across the silver surface of the steam. They were stepping stones, but Ace drew back from crossing.

A little way off, a tangled black shape lay in a ditch. She approached it and recognized the Doctor's battered bicycle.

It must have been discarded years ago. It was rusty, with grey roots twining through its wheels.

The hat, the scroll, the apparition and now this. So other things had been scattered across this place when the TARDIS exploded.

She pulled the bike out of the ditch and began to tug the roots out of the spokes. It was still serviceable, but the front tyre was flat and its wheel squeaked with age when she spun it.

It took about five minutes to inflate the tyre with the rusty pump. She was screwing back the valve cap, wishing the Doctor had ridden a Harley Davidson, when she heard it again. The noise she had dreaded. The slow wheezing and squelching footfall. There was a loud hiss and the footfall stopped.

The creature stood along the bank about fifty metres away. A massive leech that reared up, swaying to and fro as if it were hunting. A gnarled grey worm, arching up from the single broad mollusc foot of its tail to a flattened cylinder head in whose crater rested a contorted mouth like a lamprey. Lines of rippling clawed fins ran the length of its aged and cracked body.

Ace didn't dare move. The repulsive thing hissed again.

Its head sank down to the ground with a squelch. Behind it, the foot in its tail rose in a curving arch until it assumed the position she had first seen. In this foot, there was also a slavering mouth. It wheezed with its effort. But it came steadily on, cartwheeling painfully, footmouth over footmouth, covering its path with a trail of stinking slime.

Ace grabbed the bike and pulled back.

The monster was attracted by the movement. It lurched towards her, hissing like an angry steam train.

There was nothing for it. Ace reached the stream and started to manhandle the bike over the stepping stones.

Surges of mercury flooded around her feet, but she managed to keep her balance somehow. When she reached the opposite side, she stared back at the creature.

It must have been half blind, because it was casting about on the far bank, searching for traces of her. She wasn't going to hang about. She clambered on to the bike and began to pedal away. Squeaking and clattering painfully, it carried her towards the next section of the City.

Behind her, the monster heard the protesting bicycle and stopped its search. It raised its latest head, hissing and spluttering its rage as ripples spread across the mirrored stream and out across the land.

12: In Initio, ex Tempore

A ripple spreads across Time.

It disturbs the aged Process as it watches on the bank of the mercury stream. The young Process hears the disruption as it glowers in its Watch Tower, surrounded by the relentless clank of its machinery. As an embryo in its egg it feels the ripple and screams its rage.

The Phazels and their guards sense it like air shunted back and forth around them by the blast of an explosion: Captain Pekkary, as he ponders the anachronisms that ensnare them; the Guard Captain, as it searches the dark arteries of the City.

Vael snares the skinny urchin who scavenges among the City wreckage. Vael drags Shonnzi unconscious to the lair of his monstrous master.

Past, present and possible run parallel. Now here, Now there and Now just across the stream. Here there is rubble, somewhere there is a building. Crumbled dust is also solid.

But the ripple shifts Time into a new channel, making memories into imagination, and a mockery of plans. A blank page to start a fresh tale.

The great nebula slowly plumes and billows overhead like milk in water. First details change, then whole concepts.

Only the stars are the same.

And there is still only Now — stretching back to the Beginning, when they were Chronauts, before they were Phazels.

The wheel jammed. The Doctor muttered a curse and fell off his bicycle into a ditch. The front tyre was flat.

Typical. He had never encountered a machine, from a TARDIS to a tin-opener, that was entirely reliable. Give them an inch and they'd argue for miles.

Which brought him back to Ace.

No sign of her yet. He could have lost both of them. His companion and his ship.

"Don't go wandering off, Ace," had become a habitual instruction. So he had left her and wandered off instead.

Well, laws were there to be broken. How else did he gain his reputation as an innovator?

He still had his hat, but he had also lost his jacket, which was another blow. What was he going to do without his pockets? He stood in the ditch and surveyed his surroundings. The starfield overhead was both strange and oddly familiar. He normally had a fondness for paradoxes, but he was in a very bad mood. The constellations'

extraordinarily vivid luminosity was akin to a viewing from space rather than through the hazy encumbrance of a planetary atmosphere. They were bright, so the air must be thin.

He considered the upsetting manner in which his TARDIS had broken up around him. The ship had already been exhibiting dimensional

faults and he had meant to do something about them. With this sudden invasion, which he took as personally as an incursion of his own head, the TARDIS must have had little power left to resist. It had probably been trying to warn him for weeks, an annoying and parochial Earth term he had somehow picked up, but he took the ship too much for granted and now felt thoroughly ashamed. His formidable lack of knowledge of his own home and transport was emphasized by the shock he felt. He should have known better.

He had discovered further evidence of the invader in one of the corridors: a slimy trail of footsteps, bigger this time, that led from a broken roundel in the walls across the floor in the direction he had already come.

He had abandoned the bike and followed the trail on foot, supposing that he must have passed and missed the invader in the darkened passages. Then he heard its wild and bloodcurdling cry in the distance. It was a cry of hunger, he thought. And he also thought that was a nerve, because the invader, for whom he had no love, had already eaten rather well.

With a shudder, the whole dimensional environment had disintegrated around him. It had been like watching a dust storm from inside a bubble at the storm's heart. The corridor just dissolved right down through its fractals and reality fell to bits.

If any of his TARDIS had remained at all, he prayed it was the console room and that Ace had, for once, done as she was told. He had no idea as to its whereabouts. The possibilities were infinite.

Poor Ace. He was unready even to consider the consequences of his neglect. Whatever her fate, he wished her well and would try to find her again, very soon.

Whether the bubble was a freak effect or some sort of lifebelt that he had no knowledge of, he had been deposited in a narrow grey alley, heavens knew where, with two very heavy hearts.

The discovery of his bicycle, only a few yards away, suggested that the entire contents of his home might be scattered across this place. His worldly possessions distributed over people's roofs and gardens. And how much would it cost to buy them all back?

He supposed that might even include Ace but, worldly young lady that she was, she would object to being itemized as anyone's possession.

The alley emerged on to a wide flat area, a delta flood plain crossed by a distant silver stream. An ideal place to get better bearings. The ground was dry and crumbling, covered in squirls of loose material. It was hard going, like cycling across crushed meringue. He had hardly gone two hundred yards before the front wheel jammed and landed him in the ditch were he stood now.

In one direction, a millwheel without a mill was clunking round on the stream. It appeared to have no support for its central axle, unless its cogs were linked with the cogs in its mirror image on the near-perfect surface.

There was no sign of people anywhere. And no sign of vegetation on the grey plain either.

Grey buildings rose beyond the stream. A real dog's breakfast of architecture, an eccentric jumble that vied to scrape the sky and out-Babel the Tower of Babel. But the perspective was wrong. The buildings leaned at a drunken angle, more tipsy the further they went.

The Doctor squinted at them, trying to understand why he felt cramped in the middle of a wide open space.

The grey dominated everything, as if a lid had been left off and all the colour had evaporated up into the tiny sky.

Even monochrome television — black and white was a misnomer — had more shades of grey.

On this side of the stream, there were more buildings stretching as far as he could see, and a small humanoid boy who stared at him from a few feet away.

"Hello," said the Doctor by habit. "I'm the Doctor and this is..." he faltered. ". . . My broken bicycle."

The boy's ginger hair was tangled, but the colour was all the more startling against the monotonous grey of the environment. He wore a pair of general-purpose overalls, silvered like some sort of spacesuit. But there was no insignia for the Doctor to recognize.

The boy just stood and stared.

The Doctor had always found children very agreeable people. Their uncomplicated nature was refreshing and often disarming. They seemed to find a natural affinity with him and he with them. And in

one way this was curious, since most Time Lords would find children, if they ever accidentally met any, to be unnatural and uncomfortable creatures. Children were small and moved about a lot. There was a distinct lack of children at home, small ones at any rate, but there was also a deep-seated and very dark race memory. Of all Gallifrey's curses, that was the greatest and cruellest.

The Doctor felt awkward. He had no pockets to slap. He rummaged in his saddle bag and produced a small blue ball with golden eyes printed over it. "If you stand there much longer you'll take root," he said and held out the ball.

The boy shifted his feet and peered at the soles of his boots. Then he looked at the Doctor as if to say, "You're silly."

The Doctor tossed the ball gently and it rolled to the boy's feet. He picked it up and studied it.

"Keep it," said the Doctor and sat down in the dusty ditch. It was an unashamed calculation, designed to show that he was not a threat. The boy came closer.

"Do you live here?" the Doctor asked.

The boy fingered the ball, studying the patterns with his hard blue eyes. But he said nothing.

The Doctor looked up and smiled. "What's the matter?

Cat got your tongue?"

Whether in fright or plain antagonism, the boy turned and ran. A man's voice yelled from somewhere.

"No, don't go," called the Doctor. He struggled to pull the bicycle from the ditch, but it jammed on a rocky ledge. The jolt snared his fingers in the brake handle and he dropped the bike, shaking his hand in agony.

The boy was well away by now, a flash of red gold in the gloom, running towards the cover of the buildings. The Doctor looked the other way and saw a line of figures growing out of a nearby ridge.

Five adults, dressed in the same silvered suits and apparently attached to the rock at the knee. One of them, a young male, stood on his own. The other two men were dwarfed by the two tall women with whom

they stood, hands linked. They watched him impassively and so he waved his hat and called out a greeting.

At first they made no move, which seemed to be a popular pastime in these parts. When one of the women finally turned to her neighbour, the rock below them swirled up slightly and he saw that a grey smoky mist was clinging, limpetlike, to the ground around them.

He waved again.

The four were still debating him when the other man, the outsider, pointed out along the bank beyond the Doctor.

A shadow was arching its way across the darkened plain. It had grown to the size of a fully fledged mammoth since the Doctor first encountered its trail in the TARDIS

console room. At least his estimation of its form had been correct. It was some overgrown, underevolved species of annelid worm, squelching along like a voracious leech. It hissed as it progressed towards the silver stream. Once it reached the edge, it looped one foot over into the slow, mirrored torrent and began to gulp greedily.

Occasionally it lifted its footmouth up like a grotesque flamingo head. Mercury ran in silver streams down its flanks to scatter in globules across the bank.

An unreasoning rage took hold of the Doctor. This bloated and loathsome creature was responsible for the destruction of his home. It might have caused the loss of his friend. And it had marooned him in some colourless, lost desert away from help and hope. He began to march across the plain, intending to remonstrate with the culprit.

"You!" he cried. "I am the Doctor and I want a word with you!"

The monster lifted its blunt head towards him.

He caught its rotting stench and the slobbered hiss of its bony mouth. Ripples ran along its fins and the spiny claws glinted in the bright starlight. Its hide was a dark iguanodon red under the slime.

Its head spluttered down to the ground and became its foot. The other head arched up from behind and over as it moved forward to meet him.

He stopped in his tracks, amazed that anything so unwieldy should

move with such hideous grace. A few dregs of reason not yet swamped by his fury began to suggest that one of his little chats might not necessarily solve this problem.

The problem, a bulky one, was advancing with alarming speed.

The Doctor fumbled in the pocket of his trews and produced the extending aerial. A Suyryte retainer cell in its base should have stored the charge from the electrified TARDIS console. He lengthened it out like a wand and prepared to do battle with the monster.

The thing loomed above him, hissing and gurgling like a boiling samovar. Its oval mouth was a circle of gristled teeth, ringed by beady black eyelets.

"Where is my TARDIS?" the Doctor yelled at it, reluctant to resort to unreasoned violence.

Its teeth flexed in its jaw.

The Doctor held out the aerial wand in a position of challenge. "Come on then, you overgrown leech. You knew exactly what to take once you'd got in. And now you've destroyed my ship and a good friend of mine in the process!"

The circular mouth contorted to form words it was not evolved to emit. "Now Process," it whispered hoarsely, as if it had just made a discovery.

It lunged at him with its footmouth but he darted to one side, only to find the rear foot rising up to strike at him like a cobra.

He flicked out with the wand as he dodged clear. There was a quick fizz of blue energy at the side of the monster's head. It bellowed in rage and slammed its raised head towards him, squelching to the ground at the very point where he had just stood.

The Doctor had darted forward to avoid the attack. For a moment he stood between the two grounded footmouths of the creature, under a perfect arch of heaving flesh. The stench was sickening and the clawed fins splayed out to snatch at him. With the precision of an orchestral conductor, he flicked round with the wand again, applying several beats of energy to the monster's underbelly.

He pulled clear as it shuddered and gave a muffled shriek. He was getting slime on his shoes.

"This isn't getting us very far, is it?" he called as its next head rose. He was aware that on the ridge he had a group of silent spectators who had never heard of audience participation. In the other direction, he saw the ginger-headed boy watching from a distance.

The creature lunged at him again and this time the charge delivered by the wand was singularly diminished.

The Doctor began to be forced backwards. Since he was being slowly driven towards the steam, he decided that a tactical withdrawal might be in order.

The monster cartwheeled down towards him. The next lunge knocked the wand from his hand and it slid away into the dust with a final feeble spark.

The Doctor was thrown backwards. His hat rolled away across the bank. The horror rose above him, slavering horribly. "Process," it croaked again.

Something blue and gold whizzed through the air and struck the rampant brute on the side of its head. It gave a fierce hiss and swivelled round to observe its new assailant.

The ball bounced back towards the boy, who scooped it up and threw it again. It caught the beast on one of its several eyes.

The Doctor scrambled out of the range of the outraged monstrosity.

"Run!" he yelled to the boy.

The creature turned back towards him and set off in pursuit.

He was heading along the bank, unsure of where to run.

Across the mirrored stream, just above the clunking millwheel, he saw a row of nine oval stones.

He'd try anything once. He jumped to the first, then second stone as the creature reached the bank behind him.

It waited at the edge, weaving its neck back and forth, uncertain of whether to follow.

The Doctor jumped to the third and then fourth stone.

The creature still lingered, hissing its frustration at him.

He went on to the fifth, halfway across, and looked around. Mercury spilled in silver cascades from the struts of the millwheel. The coloured starlight shimmered in the stream's poisonous reflection. Like Elivâger, the cold, venomous stream that rises in Niflheim and flows through the abyss of the Ginnunga Gap, beneath the rainbow bridge of Valhalla.

On both banks, the City swept upwards until its crooked buildings, tilting inwards, seemed to touch the stars. With a shock, the Doctor understood why this place was drowning in a sense of claustrophobic vertigo. It had no horizon.

"I don't like your world," he called to the monster. "It's all warped. I can't see a future in it."

The beast stopped its weaving procrastination. With an angry hiss, it lurched forward and set its footmouth on the first stone.

Caught off guard, the Doctor's balance slipped. He floundered to keep his position, as the monster arched unsteadily over and reached the second stone. Finally, with a cry of exasperation, he lost his footing completely and fell headlong into the toxic stream. The current was stronger than it appeared. It carried him swiftly towards the massive, clanking roil of the millwheel.

Vael watched the tiny figure vanish under the great wheel.

The monstrous shape lurched from the stones back to the bank. The Pilot snatched up the fallen hat and rod. Then he ran. The creature ignored him, swinging back and forth on its foot surveying the land. A God surveying its Creation. Or a God searching for something it has mislaid.

The other Chronauts still stared down from the ridge.

Standing targets, stunned by the loss of their ship and their arrival in this desolation. Telepathic concussion had set in.

Mutual amnesia. Still forgetting that they could no longer hear warnings by thoughts alone.

"Get down!" Vael hissed at them, and they crouched obediently into the grey ground smoke.

A raucous whispered scream of rage welled up from the bank of the mercury stream. It echoed across the land, glancing off the cold grey

shapes of the City until it was lost in the stars.

"The Process of Creation, this is myself. In the Beginning, the Process creates the World. The World and the Process to go on for ever! The Future, it is already planned. Then Doctor defies the Process and steals the Future. The stolen Future, it is lost! The Process, it destroys the Doctor! All who defy the Process are destroyed! But Future is stolen and lost. Hunt and search for the stolen Future! It must be found!"

The Process gave another scream of anger and began to arch towards the hidden Chronauts. They huddled together in the low smoke as it approached. Then the monster turned aside and lurched away, swinging first one head, then the other, as it searched.

They watched it disappear into the gloom of its spoiled world. Deathly still with no movement from the land or the silver stream.

Vael watched them. He felt impervious to the shock that the others had undergone. He almost laughed at them and their misery. He was in two worlds. Outside and fascinated by what he had seen, but able to act as well. A new world that he could use. And his head was finally free of other people's thoughts.

"Where are we?" whispered Chesperl as she clung to Reogus.

The big man shook his head, still in trauma, unable to speak.

"We stay together," said Captain Pekkary. "We're still a Chronaut crew."

Amnoni rose out of the smoke. "We must find the Pilot,"

she said and pointed towards the buildings. "Children are not supposed to be left unsupervised. It's in the rules."

"I'll find him," said Vael and he ran down the ridge.

There was a shout after him, so he turned to the Chronauts and grinned. "Stay there. I'll be back. Trust me."

A bell jangled and the Phazels, searching for the Future amongst the smoke, looked up from their work.

A new shape had emerged from the jumble of distant buildings. A skeletal machine like the one the Doctor had ridden. This vehicle, wobbling unsteadily, was driven by the vigorous but unusually small

figure of a young woman.

13: Fragments of Now

Ace thought she was going in circles. Once she had crossed the stream, she pedalled the protesting bike towards the buildings on the far bank. They were newer edifices on this side — no less jumbled in layout or style, but not tumbledown. The empty streets were not filled with rubble.

Yet it was all too familiar. Very grey and frighteningly quiet. As if a new version of the City on the first bank had been constructed when the original wore out.

The silence unnerved her. She'd grown up in a city and never known what real silence was until she went on a school camping trip. She'd woken at four in the morning in a tent in a field and she'd been shaking. The silence had woken her.

A silent city was even worse.

She rode cautiously, fearing every corner and junction in case the clatter of the bike attracted guards or worse. The lurching, squelching gait of the obscene city-grey monster lingered in her head. Its jaws slobbering.

Déjà-vu City. She passed the cloud-covered wall, freshly painted, and the arcade, dappled down its length with a dull mosaic of coloured twilight. The fierce stars cast the patterns through the stained glass roof forming a glade in a crystal woodland below. The place was deserted. The new tenants had not turned up.

She chewed on one of her biscuits and began to plan ahead.

Ace's survival strategy.

But it always turned out as: what would the Doctor do if...?

1. *What good are empty pockets? Fill your pockets with anything that looks useful. Just like he does...* did.

But the Doctor's voluminous (dimensionally

transcendental, she suspected) pockets were reserved for portable items. The TARDIS had been overflowing with all manner of disparate

paraphernalia. Most of it knee deep in dust.

And you can't beat a couple of cans of nitro-nine. She missed that as much as anything.

2. *Always give any person you meet the utmost benefit of the doubt and greet them accordingly*.

If they're friendly, they'll like you. If not, it confuses them.

Oh come on, Professor. They just start shooting sooner.

How do you get away with it? Why don't I have the knack?

And do giant slobbering leeches count as people?

Her plan got no further. She was distracted by a cluster of tiny lights that lay in the centre of a street. She dismounted from the bike, anxious to look at something actually living in the dry urban desert.

It was a tight cluster of flowers, its crimson petals velvet soft, but jagged like torn flames. At the heart of each tiny blossom a fierce little light burned, proclaiming the plant's triumphant survival over its conditions. It had sprouted from a dark trail of dried green slime.

She grimaced and moved on quickly to get off the open street. She hadn't given up on finding a bath yet.

Down a tilt-walled alley, ducking the wails, until she emerged from the far end and skidded to a halt. The *déjà-vu* was more than just a feeling. She knew she had somehow come in a circle. She was facing a wide grey plain crossed by a distant silver stream and there were bicycle tracks in the dust.

But she had cycled the other way. Not this way.

She rode on, following the tracks until she reached the ditch where she had found the Doctor's bike.

It was already lying there. Freshly abandoned, without any dried roots twining through its framework. The battered, rusty bicycle she was riding, that she had discovered half an hour ago, also lay in the ditch in front of her, waiting for her to find it.

She nearly laughed out loud, but only to stop herself crying. New bikes for old. Old bikes for even older. This was crazy. She started to wheel her bike away from the new one.

She didn't dare touch it.

And across the silver stream, beyond the waterwheel, lay the City she had just been to, rearing above her — about to topple in and crush her.

The silence was deafening.

There were heads watching her from the ridge. Four heads floating like marker buoys on a ground mist where the smoke forest had once been. She didn't care any more, so she walked towards them.

The four Phazels rose up out of the mist and it ruffled and drifted. They began to bunch together as if they were afraid of her. They had been sitting on a suite composed at random of a moth-eaten sofa, a seaside deckchair and a gold-painted throne with carved dragons. The chairs were arranged in a row like grandstand seats at QPR. The sofa was from the TARDIS console room. Something else that had washed up and crashed out in the City.

OLD LADY CRUSHED BY LOW-FLYING SOFA - ACT

OF GOD BLAMED read the headline. God strikes again.

Kerpow. DUCK DOWN CONTINENTAL QUILTS.

She recognized the closest Phazel as Pekkary.

"Oi, you lot," she called. "I want to know what's going on round here. And where's Shonnzi?"

They were different from when she had last seen them.

Their hair was short and their clothes new. Their coats were gone, their faces not so drawn or old or full of lived-with terror.

"Don't come nearer," warned Pekkary.

"You what?" she said.

"Who are you? What do you want with us?"

"Listen, grumblies," she complained, "don't give me that gaff. I'm Ace. It wasn't that long since we were having tea together. What are you lot doing out here?"

So much for number 2 in Ace's strategy, she thought.

"We do not know you," stated Pekkary. "The winds of the Gods have driven us to this forsaken wasteland. We don't know what horrors this place may conjure up to plague us."

"Who are you calling a horror?" She faltered as she saw his face. His eyes blazed angrily. Both of them. His cheek was unscarred. His blind white eye was normal. She started to back off.

The place she had started off in hadn't happened yet.

The bike. The eye. The younger Phazels. She had slipped back somehow. The older Pekkary she'd met had already known who she was, but here he didn't. She'd fallen through a wormhole in Time or gone through a wardrobe or whatever you did when you didn't have a police box.

She went on the defensive. "I'm not here to attack you.

Your ship crashed, right? And you're trapped here."

"Our ship was destroyed," said Pekkary.

"Yeah, well the same thing happened to us. We're all on the doss."

"Us?" said Amnoni.

"I mean me." She decided there and then to leave the Doctor out of it, particularly considering the bad press he'd been getting from them in the future.

"What ship were you travelling in?" said Pekkary. "A Time ship?"

"Yeah. It was destroyed. I told you."

The heavy man, Reogus, stepped forward — all energy, barely controlled. "We were attacked before we crashed."

"Thank you, Reogus," said Pekkary wearily. He studied Ace with his two eyes. One safe, the other doomed. "The ship that attacked us was piloted by a being known as the Doctor. His act of hostility has trapped us here. Were you with him?"

"Never heard of him," she heard her voice saying. And she never forgave herself for it.

She thought she heard thunder somewhere in the distance.

Amnoni stepped forward, laying a restraining hand on Pekkary's arm. "We don't know you, but you spoke of the Pilot. If you know where the child is, then for pity's sake tell us."

"If you mean Shonnzi, I wouldn't call him a kid," Ace said.

"So you have seen him."

"Yeah, you could say that. In another part of the city."

Immediately the others were turning to each other, looks of relief uncurling on their faces.

"I told you he'd be around somewhere," laughed Reogus. "That's three treazants you owe me, Pekkary."

Their laughter sounded out of place, like a disco in a graveyard. Ace turned away, her thoughts racing. All she had done was cross a stream. She'd come to this City from the same City in the future, just by crossing a stream. And when she looked across this bank, there was another City beyond another stream.

She remembered Pekkary's story:

' *A great City where Time flows strangely and is fed by many tributaries and people meet their memories*.'

So was the next City in the past or the future? If she kept going would she eventually reach a point in time where she would find the Doctor?

Overhead a red star was winking like the light on a plane wing.

"Where is he now?" Pekkary was saying. "Is he safe?"

"Who? Shonnzi?" She shrugged. "I don't know. The guards were chasing us. We got split up. He can look after himself." She studied them hard, forcing herself to accept that they were the same people she'd spoken to before. Only then, they had looked like their own grandparents.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

Pekkary sighed. "Since the Beginning."

"The Beginning!" she mocked. "Wow. How long's that then?"

"In the Beginning, when the Process created the world and destroyed

the evil Doctor."

Ace bit her lip and went cold. "What do you mean, destroyed?"

Amnoni pointed down the ridge. "We witnessed their battle. Just down there on the banks of the stream. The evil Doctor was vanquished and cast down."

"Down where?" demanded Ace. "When?"

"Before the Process enslaved us," Amnoni said. "When we were still Chronauts. Before we were betrayed by Vael."

Ace's heart sank. There were no answers, just more questions. Like leaping from one stepping stone to the next, one City to the next. How far did you have to keep going?

"Who's Vael?" she said and saw the hatred on the Phazels' faces.

Vael Voryunsti Sheverell ran away across the dusty plain.

The Chronauts saw him pause close to the stream and then switch directions, following its course into the rising distance.

"What's he playing at?" exclaimed Amnoni. "He's going the wrong way!"

But they still waited. The shock of the crash robbed them of initiative or suspicion. Time was counted in the clanking of the millwheel. The stream's looking-glass surface was unbroken. There was no further sign of the Doctor.

Buried in their minds, desperately groping for the strings of each other's lost thoughts, they never noticed the line of figures crossing the stones from the far bank. Six angular creatures with bulbous red heads swathed in multiple eyes.

Whips cracked and they were surrounded.

Below them, another massive shape arched its way across the stream. Beside it came a figure they knew and would hate for ever.

Vael swaggered in the service of his new master.

Captain Pekkary stood slowly up, but the bite of a whip knocked him to the ground before the approaching monster.

The Process stopped to survey its prisoners and their insect-headed overseers. It moved its massive head to observe Vael as he stepped forward as its emissary.

"You have a new God," he announced. "Behold the Process who has delivered you from the clutches of evil. On this day, the Process has vanquished the tyrant known as the Doctor, the one who sought to trap your molten souls.

The Doctor is overthrown and destroyed. You have seen it.

Rejoice and serve the Process well. In return you shall receive food and care. Serve the Process with your gratitude."

The Process, its every breath a rasping growl, surveyed them.

Reogus stumbled to his feet. "Monster! Send us home!

We don't belong here!"

Two whips cracked out, their wicked tongues binding his arms and holding him in check. The guards chittered angrily.

"Home?" said Vael. "And where is that?"

The Chronauts stared amongst themselves. The past eluded them. They were lost and alone.

"The Future is stolen!" the Process croaked. "You are Phazels. This City Phase, it must be searched for the stolen Future. The search, begin it here. The Doctor is destroyed.

The stolen Future, it must be found."

"Sorry about that," smiled Vael. "But what could I do?"

Time whirled inside Shonnzi's brain. It was as meaningless in his head as anywhere in the City. The Beginning was still occurring somewhere. They had yet to find the Ending.

There is only Now.

Somewhere the Pilot, just a desperate kid with tangled red-gold hair, was running from what he had seen. Leaving the others trapped.

And Shonnzi had been running ever since.

"Lucky I got you before the guards," said Vael.

"Who for?" Shonnzi tried to focus, but it was easier to lie face down, staring at his own misty reflection in the steel-plate ledge on which they waited. Through the pain in his head he could hear the whirr and clack in the walls telling him he was where he had always dreaded. A prisoner in the Watch Tower at last. But Ace was still free... he hoped.

The ledge rested on iron struts, like a nest high amongst the naked mechanics of the Tower. A single platform which rose from the depths below seemed to be the only way up or down.

Shonnzi's wrists hurt behind his back. He could feel bindings cutting into the skin. "How did I get here?"

"The guards were almost on you," said Vael, somewhere above him. "I pulled you out of the way. You hit your head. Nasty."

"What against? A rock held by you?"

There was a smile in Vael's voice. "You're very heavy to drag all that way, Shonnzi. But I needed you."

"I don't collaborate."

"You knew you'd get caught sooner or later. You can't escape the inevitable."

"You're in trouble, aren't you?"

"Not as much as you. Can't find the Future, but can't escape it either." He pulled Shonnzi's head round, forcing the young man to twist over to stop his neck breaking. "I'm all right, so you're all right," Vael sneered.

Shonnzi bit his lip and lunged helplessly towards his taunter. "You dare touch that kid..."

Vael spread his hands in mock conciliation. "I touch that kid and *you* won't be here, Shonnzi." He kicked Shonnzi in the ribs. "Still pretty solid, aren't you? So the kid's all right. It would be a lot worse for the Phazels if either of us disappeared." He leaned in close. "So where's the girl?"

"Not telling." Shonnzi winced as he was kicked again.

The framework of the Tower clanked relentlessly around them.

Nothing solid or with an overall symmetry. Just a cruel, skinless construction of metal bones and moving mechanical innards greased with slime. Here and there, swathes of glutinous web were stirred by the incessant whirring of the devices.

"Have you noticed how Time's changing?" Vael said.

"The Process gets very angry about it. The brute's terrified."

"Good," said Shonnzi.

"That's when it's most dangerous," snapped Vael.

"That's why we've got to find the girl. She's something to do with the Beginning, isn't she?"

"I don't remember the Beginning. Ask the grumblies."

"If we find the girl, she'll lead us to the Doctor."

"The Doctor was destroyed in the Beginning," Shonnzi interrupted wearily.

". . . and maybe there'll be a way out of this place. If the Process finds the Future first, then we're all scrubbed."

There was a hiss like a steam piston. They stared upwards and both cowered. High above them, the monstrous creature looped its way along the underside of a heavy iron girder. One footmouth of its molluscan body stretched down towards them, and the other foot suckered to the metal surface above. The ring of feeble little eyes set around the lipless mouth regarded them.

Shonnzi tried to scramble away across the floor, but Vael kicked him back again.

"Process. It's me. Vael Phazel. Look, I brought you something."

The Process made a gurgling sound somewhere in its throat, a throat that extended from one footmouth to the other. Its clawed fins scrabbled at the girders and struts to find a hold. Once its free foot had found a grip on a jutting plate, the other foot released its hold and arched over to stare at them. The plate lowered its whirring way to the ledge.

Vael stood his ground as the Process completed a graceful cartwheel towards them. The ledge shuddered with the extra weight. The

creature's body had a sheen of slime on it, green against the ruddy brown of its hide. For its size, it exuded a sickening vigour in its movements.

"It's Shonnzi Phazel," said Vael. "I swore to you I'd find him."

The Process swung its head in close towards Shonnzi.

He choked in terror. This was the nightmare he had woken from regularly since the Beginning. It had found a way out of his head back into reality. The ring of beady black eyes and the circle of serrated teeth around its cratered mouth. But the dream had no rotting stench.

Its mouth contorted grotesquely as it struggled to form words unnatural to its shape. The sound was a dry strangulated croak like scraping iron. "The Doctor, the Process destroys him in the Beginning. The stolen Future, where is it now?"

Shonnzi's voice dried. The words cracked in his throat.

Even his scream was locked inside, echoing around his thought-emptied head.

"Now disrupts!" spluttered the Process. Its head swung towards Vael and back to Shonnzi again. "The stolen Future, find it now!"

"He can help me," said Vael. "We'll both find the Future for you.

"Shonnzi Phazel stays. The disruption, it finishes."

Shonnzi shot a glance at Vael. "You can't leave me here! Not with that thing!"

But Vael was already bowing low to the monster.

"You're right, of course. With Shonnzi here, there'll be no more disturbance to Time's patterns in the City. Now do you believe that I can serve you?" He bent towards Shonnzi and gave his head the slightest shake.

It meant: "Don't mention the girl. It doesn't know."

Shonnzi didn't have to read thoughts to know that.

"Disturbance in City's First Phase! The source, find it!"

the Process instructed.

"Thank you," Vael said. He turned to leave, some of his swagger coming back. Shonnzi watched him freeze on the edge, framed against the clacking mechanisms of the Tower walls. The platform that had raised them to this level was gone. From below, other metal platforms were rising around the ledge. Guards were positioned on them, waiting as his escort.

He turned back with a frozen smile. His head ticked. "I work better on my own. And quicker too."

"Guards ensure no delay," was the croaked response.

Vael was going to argue, but the insect-heads began to chitter angrily.

"Time, it is disturbed from Beginning," the Process continued. "The City's first Phase. Search it now!"

"There is only Now," retorted Vael, but the Guard Captain stepped in close beside him. Its movements jerked like a reluctant puppet.

Shonnzi caught the anger on Vael's face as he stepped out on to the Captain's platform. The new search party sank below the ledge and were gone.

The Process hissed hungrily as it turned its attention back to its other prisoner.

He knew what it wanted. Terrified as he was, all Shonnzi would stutter was, "I won't tell you. I won't tell you."

Pekkary leant forward in the striped deckchair. "You were with the Doctor, weren't you?" he accused.

Ace was clinging desperately to the arm of the sofa.

They kept telling her that the Doctor was dead. But she knew otherwise, didn't she?

"All right, so I was with him. What does it matter now, if he's dead like you say?"

"He trapped us here," Amnoni added from the other half of the sofa.

"No," said Ace. "It's not true. The TARDIS was attacked as well." She didn't like the way Reogus was standing behind her. And Chesperl, sitting in the gold chair opposite, staring at her, not saying a word.

They were hemming her in.

"TARDIS?" said Pekkary. "What's that?"

"Our ship, dumbo, And the Doctor wouldn't attack you. I know he wouldn't. What about this Vael creep? Sounds like he's the real troublemaker."

Pekkary levelled a finger at her. "Since the Doctor was destroyed, you are responsible."

"What you going to do about it then?" sneered Ace.

Out of the distance came the cracked notes of the bell.

"They'll be here soon," said Amnoni. "What do we do?"

"Where does she come from?" butted in Reogus. "Ask her where she comes from."

Ace clung tighter to the sofa, trying to stop saying anything she'd regret. The Doctor had lectured her about anachronisms. "I can't tell you that," she said tightly. "Not yet."

She started surreptitiously sliding her hand down the sides of the cushions, searching for anything that might help.

Her mother had often done the same through desperation, when they were short of ready cash at home.

"She's a liar," said Reogus.

"Am I?" she retaliated.

"The Gods abandoned us here. They need a sacrifice.

That would save us."

"Reogus Teleem, don't be foolish," said Amnoni.

Ace had had enough. "Your bloody Shonnzi says the Doctor's still alive. He says the Doctor taught him everything he knew. So you're wrong, aren't you?"

She was starting to pull things out from the sides of the sofa. Old coins, rubber bands, biros, a broken quill pen. All of it useless. She made one last dig and her fingers settled on something substantial.

She slid it up into her palm.

Chesperl stood up and looked along the stream.

"They're coming," she said.

A group of guards was moving along the bank.

"Hide her," said Amnoni. "She may find Shonnzi for us."

Pekkary stared at Ace for a moment. "Get behind the double chair," he said. "We'll create a diversion. Then you run."

"Thanks," said Ace. She glanced at the item she had retrieved, a Swiss Army knife inlaid with the silver letters IC.

She pocketed it and turned to find Reogus blocking the way.

"No," he said and caught her arm in a vicelike grip. "She was with the Doctor. Hand her over and the Process may release us."

Ace struck at him with her fist. "The Doctor would have helped you! But it's too late. You'll spend the rest of your lives as slaves to the Process. I know that because I've been across the river in the Future and seen it!"

"The Future," muttered Pekkary with slow deliberation.

"Yeah! So things don't look too good for you!"

"The Gods may forsake us," he said grimly and glanced round at the others. "They may abandon us to torment, but we are still a crew."

Sometimes it still worked. With one movement they bunched in on her.

"Doctor!" she yelled as her arms were gripped. She was lifted bodily off the ground and carried to meet the expedition of approaching guards.

Vael was at their head.

"Well," he smiled as he saw the new offering to their God, "I'll see what I can do about extra rations."

"I'll be back," yelled Ace as they carried her away. "You remember that. I'll be back!"

14: Tales from the Tongues of Fish

The Pythia stood before the Gate of the Future. It was ajar.

But when she approached, the huge bronze doors slammed shut.

Time's wall edged eternally forward, so that the past appeared to seep from under its massive stones. The Pythia had to walk steadily to keep up.

In the land behind her, history was charted like a map.

The great wars and mighty deeds of Heroes were laid out in a panoply that praised the glory of the Gods and the Gallifreyan Empire. It was clear as the night stars. Even the distance was clear and close. All of history marching inexorably away from this point.

The wall was already moving ahead and the Pythia's feet were ankle deep in mud. She moved with difficulty, struggling to make up lost ground.

When she neared the great doors again, they were open wide. Beyond it, in the Future, lights were moving. Not bright torches or stars, but pale glows diffused into the coloured shadows that passed back and forth.

Once it had been clear and close as the past. But now she could make out nothing clearly.

She struggled on through the mud, reaching for the Gate and the gap. The doors slammed in her face again.

She grasped at the great handle on the Gate and clung to it, carried forward with the advancing wall.

There were ornate grilles in the doors and wall. Metal gratings decorated with beautiful carved spikes. Figures moved behind them. Heads clustered at the openings to stare out at her. There was laughter.

The wall rose up and up until it was lost in the heavy clouds. Carrion birds nested on its ramparts. A cold wind had started to blow from the past.

The Pythia beat her hand against the Gate, but it stayed firmly shut.

She, most adept of the Wise, who once held the key to all the sights of the Future, was denied entry.

She knew the voices that laughed. Rassilon and his ignoble confederates had barred the doors against her.

She opened her eyes and stared down from her basket at the sisters who were in attendance below. They took it in turns to sit and watch her. Her servant, Handstrong, never left his place at the cavern mouth.

Let them wait. Fifteen days now since she had spoken a single word. And she had stayed locked in her cage above the crevasse all that time. Private audiences and public levees had to be cancelled. Anmers-Tonanstide, the Festival of the Timewright, went unblessed. The sisters daily turned a crowd of petitioners away from the Temple gates.

She had always travelled in the City in her State palanquin, ready to meet the people in the streets. Each morning she had walked in the herbal knot gardens of the Temple. These rituals meant nothing to her now.

Nor did she watch the City from her screen. It showed only a flickering pattern of static, a reflection of the emptiness in her head and heart.

Yet she ate well enough, existing on the diet of fish tongues that was the staple food of a Pythian seer.

The sisters read any news aloud to her each day, unsure if she could hear or comprehend their words. Her withdrawal from public life was causing anxiety and speculation throughout Gallifrey. The mutual pool of people's thought, impossible to ignore, chittered with unquiet rumour.

It was reported that she had lost her powers. Speculation became fact in the media, which vomited out quarter-truths and exaggerations and then fed greedily on its own spew.

The neo-technologists were already making political capital out of it. There were rumours that Rassilon would be called upon to challenge her authority. Worried communiqués arrived from governors on the farthest reaches of the Empire. The suet workers threatened to strike. At noon on the sixty-third day of spring, it snowed.

The Court of Principals patched over the day-to-day running of the

state, but the Pythia was Gallifrey and its Empire, both constitutionally, by divination and by the investiture of the Gods. The cracks started to widen.

Rassilon remained silent, apparently content to observe where the situation would lead without further interference.

And the Pythia waited too. Or so it seemed. Only her hands moved, picking over the jewels and talismans on her smoky robes.

All would be well when the Scaphe returned.

In her mind she searched for Vael. Turning and returning every memory, searching for a chink in the wall that blocked her sight.

She was locked in with herself. In her thoughts there was no passage of Time.

The Scaphe was due at any moment now. Ninety minutes would soon be over. Time dragged slowly sometimes. But when the Scaphe returned, she would put things to rights.

Vael was there somewhere. Her pawn. She had only to find him in her thoughts. But there was a figure in the shadows who had mocked at her powers. She thought it was Rassilon. He pried among her thoughts like a thief sifting through stolen booty. She would drive him away out of the shadows, and out of her head.

She thought of torches and stars, but the veil of shadows grew denser until the darkness was complete.

The night in her head was cut by a venomous hiss. The voice of the Amphisbaena: the terrible beast from the Book of Future Legends. The fabulous serpent with a head at each end of its writhing body.

She returned to the other reality and stared at the sister adepts below her. Why were they whispering in the bounds of the holy cavern? They should be preparing for the return of the Scaphe. Ninety minutes was almost over.

She strained to catch their words.

"... they must have given up hope on the Time Scaphe by now. How long has it been missing? Fifteen days?"

A pit gaped open in the Pythia's stomach. Her hands tugged at her

jewels. The Future had been stolen.

"Fish tongues!" she cried aloud, her voice cracking with disuse. "More fish tongues!"

15: Time and Again

The little animal froze in a blind terror. It scuffled one way across the ledge, allowed just so far before the silver paw batted it back in the other direction.

There was no escape. The cat dabbed at the dust-grey shrew again, just as Time played with the hapless inhabitants of the City below. The tiny creature squealed and scuffled the length of the high ledge.

The cat pounced and pinned its victim down. Its amber eyes were sharp as teeth with narrow black slits like claws.

Its paws turned the shrew over and over in the dust.

The sound of tramping feet.

The cat looked up from its prey. It could see nothing in the Street below, but the sound was nearby.

Its paws loosened their grip and the reprieved shrew darted for a crack in the crumbling masonry.

The silver cat gathered itself and sprang. It gleamed like flung mercury as it arced through the air, travelling from one building top to another. Leaping beyond the bounds of any natural cat.

It ran up the tilting summit of this next structure, and perched on a baroque mansard shaped like an outstretched wing. Figures were moving below, guards marching as if there was no Time to spare, travelling on a direct route towards the looming edifice of the Watch Tower.

On another artery adjacent to the first, a grey shape was cartwheeling its effortful way along. It hissed as it went. The cat's tail began to lash. It arched its back and spat at the unwelcome usurper of its world.

The dark excretory trail that the creature left directly crossed the path of the oncoming guards.

Ace travelled backwards, slung over the shoulder of one of the guards and too exhausted to keep up a struggle. They seemed to have been yomping along for hours. The guard's cluster of composite eyelets rippled beside her head. It kept twelve eyes on her and watched where it was going with the other dozen. Its dark red and mandibled insect head was more like a helmet asserted over its scabrous humanoid body.

Rough armoured growths encrusted the forms of all the guards, yet Ace was certain, either by instinct or intuition, that her guard, the smallest guard, was a female. They all kept up an endless chittering to each other, relaying incomprehensible messages and orders through high-speed trills and squeaks that made Ace's head reel.

On a sudden shout from Vael, the group halted and the chittering stopped. Her guard waited, apparently unwilling to relieve itself of her weight for even a short time.

No chance of legging it while they were busy, but she still felt like a good barney with someone. Apart from Shonnzi, she didn't much rate anyone she had met here. But Vael was the worst. His long red hair, not as red and gold as Shonnzi's, and the permanent sneer on his thin spotty face really riled her. A wimp with power: she wanted to pummel his face in.

She heard him say, "If it's come back, then the Process is in trouble." He was frightened.

"Oi, mush!" she yelled. "Are we moving or what?" She gave the back of her guard a hearty thump with her fist. Its claw tightened around her.

Vael appeared by her head. "You're worth a lot to me,"

he said. "You can save all of us, if you listen."

"Go stick your head in a breezeblock sandwich."

"Down!" he snapped. The guard released her and she tumbled to the ground. He crouched beside her and kept his voice low. "For a long time, I thought things couldn't change round here. We were all trapped in the circle. But you prove that it can be broken."

"Then you'd better treat me properly."

His voice hardened and his eyes darted towards the guards and back again. "Not just me. That's why the Process wants you."

Ace shook out her hair. It was thick with dust.

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE. NOTORIOUS NITRO-NINE

QUEEN ACE, ALSO KNOWN AS DEAD-EYE DOROTHY —

Crimes include Arson, illegal Use of Explosives and Being Rude to Her Mother.

It was fame of a sort. She took it as a kind of compliment and understood why the Doctor could secretly enjoy such notoriety. Whatever the authorities said, it was always done in a good cause. She allowed herself time for a little preening. "Do I get to make demands?" she said.

"That depends on how much you cooperate."

"Who with?" She could guess the answer already. Vael had games of his own to play.

He pointed ahead. At the junction with another street, a trail of slimy green footprints crossed their path.

"Do you know what that means?" he asked.

The slime was fresh and glistening.

"The Process?"

"But the Process is in the Tower," he said with a knowing smile.

"Perhaps it has family."

He shook his head. "There's only one Process."

"So why don't you go and find out?" she retorted. "Do I get proper treatment or what?"

To her increasing irritation he began to laugh, a nervous, edgy laugh accompanied by a tick of the head.

You're on the brink, she thought.

"It means trouble," he said. "And you know nothing about this place."

"I don't care either," Ace snapped. "I want to find the Doctor. And don't give me that guff about 'the Doctor was destroyed in the Beginning'. I

know he's here. And Shonnzi knows as well."

The sneer switched off his face like a change in channels and a rage burned up in his eyes. She had never seen a rage like it. A seething rage you could almost touch.

He tautened with an intensity that actually knocked her backwards. His eyes were like suns. A wave of heat enveloped her like the blast from a furnace. She felt her skin tighten and sting as if she was being burned alive.

A claw pulled Vael back. He was thrown across the street and lay shaking, apparently terrified by the energy that he had unleashed at her.

Looming over him, the Guard Captain was contorted at a bizarre puppet angle. Its claws pushed at its own armoured helmet. "Leave her!" warned its muffled voice.

The others barred Ace's way. They squealed in anger.

The Captain twisted again and assumed a new and very powerful position. It seemed to stretch taller. Its eyelets agitated wildly. It turned to take in its surroundings as if for the first time. A new voice issued through its throat, cracked and ancient as if the vocal cords were being forced to create sounds they were not designed for.

"These alternatives, bring them to the Watch Tower."

The voice chilled Ace. but she was not going to panic.

Vael's head twitched with fear. She saw that he was completely terrified.

"I give the orders," he muttered. "They're meant to obey me."

Ace stood up and faced the Captain. "You beetle-heads have been looking for me, right? And you think I'm the answer to your problems."

All the creature's eyelets inclined towards her. She reckoned that constituted an audience and got into her stride.

"So if I'm so precious to you, there's a few things we're going to get clear now. I don't think much of your set-up round here. There's going to be some changes."

A ripple of chittering went around the other guards.

"For a start, you're going to listen to what people round here want and that means decent food and clothes for all of them."

Vael looked up at her. He began to laugh.

She ignored him. Under the Captain's implacable stare, she could already feel her act falling apart, but she kept going anyway. "And when that's sorted out, *then* we're going to have a little chat about . . ."

Claws were laid on them both and experience went for nothing again. Ace was bunched together with Vael, and this time she was forced to walk as well. The Captain led the way and the two prisoners were driven on with the other guards grouped around them.

How come it always worked for the Doctor? Next time she'd do it her way. A can of nitro had a unique diplomacy all of its own.

"At least they haven't got Shonnzi," she added.

Vael was shoved ahead by the guards, but she saw his face. Tears were streaking the dust on his cheeks like war paint. "I delivered Shonnzi to the Tower myself."

"Bastard!" she muttered.

A whip cracked, forcing them forward.

"It's all sewn up," he said. "We're scrubbed."

"What do you mean?"

"You're an alternative to the Process's plans. It thinks it's God. Anything that opposes it gets blotted out."

"Great," said Ace.

The whips cracked and they were forced out into the open.

A vast area had been cleared to allow for the presence of one mountainous edifice. It squatted like a repulsive mechanical growth, black and immense against the blazing sky. Girders and struts jammed together like stacked wreckage. A tangled web of iron. The structure swept upwards at impossible and harsh angles in a crude scaffolding of spires and peaks. Any flesh had decayed and dropped from the Watch Tower long ago, but there was still movement inside the metal

skeleton. Machinery clanged and squealed. Wheels, spindles, cogs, springs and pendulums turned and swung in insane and pointless industry. Ace had never seen anything so cruel and heartless.

The silver line of the mercury stream flowed out from the black pit of a gate between the Tower's extended fingers.

From its summit came the cracked notes of the broken chimes.

The guards pushed Ace and Vael onwards towards the Tower.

High on the buildings above, the cat observed the guards'

progress. It leapt across the Street again to watch another creature looping its way to the Tower on a separate route.

The cat mewled, running this way and that in a sudden agitation. It stopped and mewled again, unable to see for the tall buildings what it also knew to be approaching.

A dark figure walked the arteries of the City. It was clothed in shadow even in the broadest starlight. A robe billowed wide from its shape, but there was no wind. A circular collar rose above its head like a cowl of darkness.

Thunder rumbled. The spectre glided inexorably forward like a bolt of dark mist, a gaunt terror, moving pace by pace towards the grim mountain of the Watch Tower.

The mechanisms of the Tower clanked around the guards and their prisoners like a chorus of untuned anvils. The passages were walled like an open maze of iron ribcages through which they could see the perpetual grinding motion of wheels and chains in their unwieldy matrix. Occasional swathes of slimy weblike cocoons wound between axles and shafts. They had a dull sparkle like tarnished glitter, reminding Ace of rotting Angel Hair on an iron Christmas tree.

She and Vael were eventually herded to the end of a passage blocked by a curving wall. The guards waited while Ace stared up at the crisscross of girders and machines that towered above her. The Eiffel Tower had been crossed with a Victorian iron foundry and allowed to run wild.

"Now what?" she said impatiently, but Vael had long since given up talking.

With a jolt that made Ace yell, the floor detached itself from the tunnel and became an unsteady platform. It pivoted upwards on the rim of a vertical metal disc, carried like one of the swinging baskets on a fairground Big Wheel.

Ace crouched low on the platform, experiencing the vertigo that she normally never knew. Beside her, Vael stood upright, taking short breaths as if expecting judgement to strike from the girders above.

His voice, thin and frightened, whispered, "Don't antagonize the Process. Leave the talking to me."

This time Ace didn't say a word.

Oh Professor, she thought, where the hell are you now?

The platform topped the disc's summit and attached itself to a level silver plate wedged like a nest between a splay of girders. It was pocked with slimy green footmarks.

Ace recognized the stench. A massive red-brown arch of rippling tissue stood at the far side of the area. One footmouth reared up with a hiss and the ring of beady eyes stared myopically at them.

Vael gripped her shoulder and pulled her forward.

"Process. It's Vael Phazel. I've brought you the alternative.

This is the source of disruption to the Time you planned. I promised you I'd bring it."

Ace wrenched his hand away. "You bastard!"

The Process completed a somersault and leaned its second head towards her. The circle of its mouth formed a lipless pout.

Ace was revolted. She fought off a desire to run, even to fling herself off the platform to get away from the monster.

"Is this the alternative?" grated the Process. The monster constantly swayed with the same predatory nervous energy that Ace had seen in polar bears at the zoo. And they were supposed to be mad as well.

"I found it searching for the Doctor," Vael added.

"Where's Shonnzi?" demanded Ace.

The vile head swung closer to Ace and declaimed, "The Doctor. The Process destroys him at the World's Beginning!"

"Like hell!" Ace retaliated. She wondered what time the ghostly clock showed now. Was it still 11:56?

"The Future, it was stolen from the Process by the Doctor!"

"Good!"

"And now you've found it again," insisted Vael. "Don't you recognize the source of the disruption when you see it?"

He gripped Ace's arms tightly, his fingers pinched the skin through her jacket. The Process gurgled as it leaned in still closer. She turned away her head from the stench.

"This disruption, it will be cut off at its source." It arched back its head and unleashed a rasping howl of triumph which rang in the girders. "The stolen Future, when it is secured, the Process will be complete at last!"

Vael shoved Ace on to the centre of the platform. Metal clanked as the girders over the platform tilted backwards.

She realized too late that both the Process and Vael had moved to the edge of the area. Wheels turned as a steel spindle lowered through the opened canopy.

She ran at Vael with a shout, but be sent her sprawling backwards. Above her, the spindle began to turn at a ferocious velocity. It threw out a filament of translucent thread that glittered as it fell. As fine as a single hair but expelled at such speed that it coiled around Ace in a frantic spiral. It clung to her, stinging as it wound her in a sparkling cocoon.

The cat walked through the entrance to the Tower as if it owned the place.

It sauntered past a sentry, ignoring the stare of twenty-four clustered eyelets. When the clumsy guard came lumbering after it, the cat turned and spat an angry warning.

It dodged the lunging claws with the degree of elegance that only a cat can muster, and swiped at the heavy boot as it shot between the frustrated guard's legs.

The cat was very particular about who picked it up. Only Pilots had that privilege.

Behind it, the guard was chirruping urgent messages to its comrades. The response came thundering up the tunnel to meet the intruder.

Intruder? What audacity! What presumption!

The cat slipped between the iron ribs. It sat out of reach, so elegant among the clanking mechanisms of the excrescent growth that fouled its world.

The guards gathered, staring through the gap, trilling in anger at their tormentor until a sudden new presence blotted out the starlight in the main doorway.

The dark apparition passed the Tower's threshold. It moved unerringly forward with a terrible grace, and the guards shrank before its pall of shadow. Step by step, along the cold passages of metal bones. A black flame, an embodiment of night, invoked by the terror from which all phantoms are born.

The mechanisms jolted and grated. The spindle jammed in a shower of sparks and a startling silence fell across the Tower. The thread from the spindle snapped.

Ace crouched on the platform floor trying to catch her breath through the shroud that bound her. She heard the Process croak with rage. Repeatedly it ordered for the work to continue, but the machines were unresponsive.

Angling her head against the tight stretch of the filament, she was able to see out across the platform.

The Process was swinging its head through a wide arc as if it was searching the canopy of girders above. Dwarfed beside the monster, Vael was already staring upwards at something overhead. The Process saw the presence and gave an angry hiss.

From somewhere there came an echo. A second hiss, deeper and more laboured than the first. Ace strained to look, but her head was held tight by her bonds. The dull clank of one single machine began to cut through the silence.

Ace had crouched and spread her arms wide when the filament had started to fall. Now she was able to peel her arms free of the tight

cocoon and move about a bit. The strand glimmered faintly like an endless procession of glowworms on a conveyor belt. She managed to get one hand into a pocket and pull out the Swiss Army knife.

Opening the knifeblade blind was a dicey business. She expected to feel it slice into her fingers.

The repeated clanking sound was drawing closer. "It's coming," she heard Vael say, and the Process gave a glottal croak that sounded like a choke of fear. Through the binding filament, Ace could see the girders moving again. A whole section was slowly tilting by degrees towards the platform.

She found what felt like a blade against her thumb and started to ease it between the threads. But when she saw the shape that was descending, she nearly gave up altogether.

A small ledge was jolting down on a diagonal wheel towards the main platform. On it stood a second creature like the Process, its neck extended to observe the scene it was entering. Its features were similar, but its hide was rough and greying unlike the sleek red brown of the original.

The fins that ran in lines along its back were stiffer and less mobile. This monster was older, but no less repulsive than the first.

No, not the first. Ace suddenly remembered that this new arrival was the creature she had seen on the bank of the first City she had visited. No, that was the second City, the one in the future, where she had been first, before crossing the mercury stream into the past.

The two creatures reared up and hissed at each other as the ledge levelled with the platform. Vael ducked for safety behind his slobbering master.

Ace was reminded of the dinosaur movies she had seen. There was always a scene when the bikini-clad heroine was being chased by Godzilla or King Kong or a lizard with glued-on horns. It was about to munch her when another special effect monster turned up and the two had a bout of all-in wrestling.

Ace had no rock to hide behind. She didn't own a leather bikini. And she was fed up with thinking the weirdest things when she was in dead trouble. The older Process arched forward off its ledge with a smooth predatoriness that she'd rarely seen in a stop-motion special effect.

"I return myself," croaked the creature. It was the voice that the Guard Captain had spoken with. "Time disrupts." It put down its leading footmouth and arched up the second foot from behind. "Why?" it demanded.

The younger Process swung its upper footmouth around and down. The two creatures began to circle the edge of the platform, always keeping the other in opposition. Ace dared not move, glimpsing each as it crossed her limited line of vision. It was not easily apparent which Process was pursuing the other.

The voice of the younger Process was wilder and more manic. It was attempting innocence. "Time, it has not changed! If Time changes, the older Process is destroyed!"

"More worse for you!" The older creature's threats were more considered and its tirade carried far more weight. "If the older Process is destroyed, then the younger Process is not long lived!"

They were too busy haranguing each other, Ace decided, to notice her. She set to work on the filaments with the knife.

"The World City, it is left in your control. But the Phazels, they are idle," complained the older. "The stolen Future, it is not secured. Now disrupts!"

Ace saw it swing its head towards the cowering Vael.

Vael bowed his head. "Process, I only obey my orders.

But. . ." He lifted his head and Ace saw that he was looking at her. "But the cause of the disruption has been . . ."

"Disruption! There is none!" interrupted the younger Process. It struck Vael a blow with its head which nearly knocked him from the platform.

"It never learns," the monster added.

The older creature peered myopically at Vael for a moment and then said, "Then what is this?" It inclined its head towards the cocoon.

Ace froze, her knife jammed between the filaments.

"Nothing," croaked the younger Process.

"Nothing?"

It was bad enough that the creatures could speak English. Their leaden attempts at sarcasm were all the more unnerving.

"On my journey, I learn much. In the World City, I see many things in all the Phases. Things the younger Process is yet to learn." Its head lowered to examine the cocoon at close quarters, nearly choking Ace with its stench. "But one thing I learn, which is more important than all others." It swung back to face its protégé. "Never be away too long!"

The younger creature made an angry growling in its lengthy throat. "The disruption in the City, it is settled. The Phazels, they continue searching for the stolen Future."

"Shonnzi," interrupted Vael. "I have captured Shonnzi."

"Shonnzi Phazel is captured," announced the younger Process as if this were its own personal triumph. "This is still in the Time you planned."

"Time? Some fragments remain inevitable. The overall pattern? That is altered," argued the older monster. "The stolen Future slips away. This Now is not in my memories. It has not happened before. On the middle Phase of the World City, I see a new Phazel creature. A female."

"The disruption in the City, it is already dealt with," the younger protested. It arched sideways, putting itself between the older creature and the cocoon.

The other shuddered with rage. "Time charted from the Beginning is changed! The new Phazel, it must be found and utilized. Like the others. In the City there is a new rumour."

"What rumour?"

"The Doctor, he will return!"

Ace grinned to herself. She tried to slide her knife back inside the cocoon, but it jammed in the threads.

"Impossible!" declared the younger. "The disruption and rumours, they are in your heads. The new Phazel, it is already absorbed. There is no more disruption!"

Ace jerked back the knife. The filament snapped with a fizz and the procession of glimmering lights faded. The charge of static that held

the cocoon together was broken. It fell apart around Ace.

She looked up at the vile cratered footmouth and ring of tiny eyes that loomed over her.

"It is here!" spluttered the older Process.

From behind, the voice of the younger Process cried,

"Another disruption. Destroy it! Quickly!"

The air turned suddenly cold. The massive brute reared its head like a snake about to strike.

There was a sudden cry from Vael. The creatures both turned from their prey to stare at the figure that stood in their midst.

The dark figure, its cloak of shadow billowing, advanced slowly upon them. The two Processes retreated before it, hissing and spitting their hatred. He seemed taller in this manifestation, but Ace still recognized the ghastly sepulchral features of the Doctor. White light reflecting from some misplaced star glinted in his staring eyes. The huge circular collar rose above his head like black wings.

"Doctor!" called Ace, close to tears. "Doctor, I need you!"

She lunged at the robe, but her hand passed straight through the heavy fabric as if it never existed.

The spectre ignored her cry of despair, directing the dark fury of its glare against the cowering monsters.

"It returns," chorused the Processes. "Time disrupts. It comes from the World's Beginning to steal the stolen Future again!"

Out of its ghostly robes ran the silver cat. It paused and scrutinized Ace for a second. Its eyes were like jewels. Then it darted on to the slime-covered ledge that the older Process had arrived on. Festooned in thread, Ace scrambled across the platform after it.

By the time she reached the ledge, the cat was already trotting up the curve of the wheel beyond. The contraption immediately levered upwards and Ace clung to it, listening to the shrieks of the monsters below. She tried to put the Doctor behind her. But he was always there in her head. So why should he be dead? Why shouldn't there be ghosts of the living too?

"Ace," he'd say with his impish smile. "I can't let you out of my sight for one minute." And then he'd dab the tears from her cheeks with his paisley scarf. It had to be the scarf, because the matching hanky was probably tying together two errant bits of the ever-expanding, entropic universe.

Who was she trying to kid? Nothing stays the same. It all disintegrates in the end. Never trust rumours. Even knots come undone and hankies get frayed. Yet something was going on, so she was going with it. Nowhere else to go. The mechanism was carrying her up even further into the nightmare tower with only a wayward silver moggie for very doubtful company.

16: The Big Wind-up

The cat sprang on to a passing girder and vanished into the gloom. Ace was left on her own.

The ledge ferried her on a diagonal wheel, juddering upwards through the Watch Tower's iron skeleton, as if each inch it moved might be the last. The other springs and chains were slack. Time's momentum had run down. The clacking wheels and pendulums had frozen at the shock of the phantom's appearance.

The terrified hiss of the Processes rose from below her, but Ace did not look back. She pulled at strands of filament on her grubby clothes. They called her the Future. At least they thought she knew where the Future was. So the Future always faced the front. The Past could look after itself.

The ledge groaned to a halt a metre from another high walkway. It began to teeter backwards in a series of tiny jolts. Ace threw herself across the widening gap. Under her the hungry abyss opened out. Then her arms hugged at a girder and her feet hit the floor. Behind her, the ledge clattered down the curve of the wheel like a broken toy.

The walkway was slung high inside the Tower fretwork.

There was no sign of the cat. The metal plate floors and gantries were pocked with the Processes' footsteps, some dry encrusted, some glistening fresh. The passage followed a slow spiral, downwards and outwards like a giant spring around which the Tower had grown.

At one point it emerged, high on the outside of the Tower. Ace

ventured cautiously out into the open and stared across the City around and beneath her. The world she had been condemned to was arrayed in a nightmare symmetry that clamped around her head like a thought-vice. *Miehrrvre* of the brain.

She squinted, but couldn't focus. The perspective was a nightmare. A crushed, grey kaleidoscope of buildings rising around the sides of the basin. Tilting in, dwarfing the mountainous Tower that loomed like an iron canker at the City's heart.

The City spread to the straight bank of the mercury stream that flowed from under the Tower. And on the far side, the buildings started again. The same City repeated.

The next phase, past or future, with the same buildings. In the high distance, Ace saw the Phazels. Tiny figures moving on the face of the City. Slaves searching for the Processes'

stolen Future.

She ran along the circling balcony, watching the City until she saw another mercury stream. And beyond it, past or future, another phase of the City rose up. There were no Phazels to be seen here, but a column of smoke was rising from between the jumbled buildings.

There was no wind, so the smoke rose in a thin uninterrupted strand up into the stars, feeding the opaque splash of the great nebula.

The stars blinked and flickered like sky-circuitry, fiercer and richer in coloured luminosity at this height. And then the nebula churned as if blown by a gust of solar wind, and Ace glimpsed through the sky beyond the stars to where another City curved like a dim canopy overhead.

It was like circling forever inside a goldfish bowl.

If she stared hard at a point, it came into sharper focus, zooming into close detail. In the heart of the City was a wide area like the face of a clock. Its surface was uneven and soft as if it had been melted, but the patterns inlaid in lines of black were clear. The roman numerals circling the dial went up to XIII. One of the ornate hands was broken. The other pointed to the VII.

A speck was moving fast along one of the streets. Ace thought she saw herself, bicycling unsteadily down the curve of the City until she was lost among the buildings.

She ran back along the balcony.

On a different phase of the City below, she saw herself again. A tiny speck, further off, standing talking to someone she could not quite make out. She stared so hard, unsure if she was looking into the past or future, that her eyes began to smart.

Parallel worlds. But Time in the City ran parallel with itself within the municipal boundaries. Riddles and mazes were OK on paper when you could work out what was going on. Because she was Ace, she had to get physically stuck in the middle of one with extra-dimensional penalties and without a guidebook or teacher's notes.

If she was trapped here, she would have to learn to live with it. And maybe with herself too. She had to know. It was driving her crazy.

"Ace."

She thought she heard her name and stared out across the City.

"Ace!"

It was coming from close by inside the Watch Tower.

She slid between the girders, ducked under a giant cog wheel and saw a swathe of glimmering web wound in the iron matrix. Something was buried in the cocoon — a figure, its feet where its head should be. "Come on," it complained in a muffled voice. "We haven't got all day."

At last, she thought. It's him at last.

She peeled back the web with the Swiss Army knife.

Shonnzi's head grinned at her, upside down with the Doctor's hat still planted firmly on.

"Evening," he said. "Got any biscuits."

More than anything, she had to know.

"Is he really dead?" she said. "They keep saying he's dead."

"Are you going to get me down or what?"

"Just tell me!"

"Is who dead?"

"The Doctor!" she cried. "They say he's dead. You keep saying you've seen him." She looked straight down into his startled eyes. "What did you see then? His ghost?"

"Don't know," he said irritably. "It wasn't like that. Just get me out of this, will you? I'm brittles and fricpins all over."

She began to hack at the filaments with the knife. "But you have seen him?"

"Yes."

"And he taught you things?"

"Still does."

"Still!"

"I've just been talking to him," Shonnzi declared.

The filament snapped with a fizz and the cocoon unravelled. Ace caught Shonnzi as he fell forward. They landed together in a heap on the plate floor.

"First time I've seen him for ages," he grinned with his face inches above hers. His breath was warm on her cheek.

She eased herself out from under his body, ignoring the fact that he made no deliberate attempt to pull away. "You're a liar," she said.

"No, I'm not," he said firmly, meeting her accusing stare head on. He sniffed as he looked over the edge. "We can't stay here."

A chain nearby clanked. Its loose links slowly began to tighten.

"Did he just stroll up for a chat then?" said Ace coldly.

"How come he never talks to me?"

"He will. He's coming closer."

"Prove it! What's that ghost thing then? Is that him?

Where exactly do you see him?"

Shonnzi never blanched. He just adopted a matter-of-fact, irritated schoolteacher voice. "When I'm asleep," he said.

Anywhere else she would have laughed. But why not?

Let's all talk in our sleep. Any sensible idea round here got trotted off to the knackerman as soon as it was thought of.

Perhaps he was as crazy as she was. Yeah, why not?

It was no good. She wanted something tangible. Not dreams and ghosts.

He picked up the knife and looked at the initials on the handle. "IC. Ian Chesterton," he said.

"Who?" said Ace.

Around them, the giant mechanisms began to clank and clatter like the winding of a vast cosmic clock. The wheel beside them started to grind round, its cog teeth bit at the air as it turned faster. The mechanical corpse of the Tower was returning to life.

"We've got to get out," Shonnzi said. He put his hand on her arm. "We'll find the Doctor. He said I'll know when the Time's right."

"Yeah," she said, uncertain. "I can imagine."

She turned to go and saw another swathe of web through the struts. "Hang on," she said and ran along a slim girder, balancing over a dizzying drop.

Shonnzi faltered and then ran after her, snatching at her arm. "No, Ace."

"I want to see."

There was another cocoon dangling between the girders. Another upside-down victim.

"Leave him, Ace," pleaded Shonnzi.

Ignoring the chasm below, she wrenched free of his grip and tore apart the filament around the prisoner's head. It was Vael. Another Vael. He was pale and haggard, and Ace could not tell if he was older or younger than the Vael she had left below.

His eyes flickered open and saw her. "So that's the dream," he muttered blearily.

Ace heard the chittering of guards in the depths of the Tower.

"Come on," hissed Shonnzi.

She slipped and teetered precariously on the brink.

Shonnzi's arm grabbed her back and he began to pull her away.

"We can't leave him!" she protested, too giddy to struggle.

They reached the plate and moved out on to the walkway. "Oh, yes we can!" he snapped. "Do you want to find the Doctor?"

She was going to argue, but the guards' cries were getting closer. "I'll be back for him," she insisted. It was the let-out she needed.

"You don't mean that," he said as they ran.

"The Doctor would do it," she retorted and added caustically. "But then you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

She looked back. Three guards had appeared and were pounding after them. Ahead, the walkway re-entered the body of the Tower. A wheel like a timber saw was carving across the entrance with serrated teeth.

They skidded to a halt and the guards stopped too, content to leave their victims trapped.

On one side, the vertiginous scaffold edifice rose above them. On the other, a series of black metal plates sloped down the Tower's escarpment like buttresses holding the tangled growth of girders in check.

There was nowhere to run.

Shonnzi faced the guards. "You can't hurt us," he called.

"You know you can't. There'll be no hope if you do."

The creatures chittered among themselves, but advanced no father.

A section of girders opened up like an iron shutter and the Process cartwheeled out on to the walkway. It was the younger creature and with it was Vael. Its slimy hide glinted in the coloured starlight. The massive head swung from its guards to its victims.

"Take them!" it croaked.

Ace edged backwards as the guards advanced. She glanced at Shonnzi. He was sweating profusely. They were too close to the edge.

"Oh Gods, Doctor!" he shouted. "Why did you get me into this mess?"

" *Ace,*" said the Doctor's voice in her head.

The cat brushed like cold liquid against her legs. It twined back, getting hopelessly under her feet. She lost her balance, grabbed for Shonnzi's hand, missed and stumbled headlong over the edge.

The air was so still it was almost solid. Ace was cradled, not falling but sinking through a treacly miasma of molecules. Waves of rising power that buffeted against her downward momentum.

Ealing Broadway, she thought, before the tenancy of her mind was lost and she was evicted from her own head.

Vael stared after Ace. Her tiny form spiralled slowly into the darkness. Hateful little creature. The City looked after its own. Her wide brown eyes and antagonism reminded him of Loie.

Beside him, the Process hissed its rage.

Shonnzi stood alone on the walkway, trapped between the guards and the spinning saw wheel.

"Take him!" Vael shouted.

There was a rumble of thunder as they advanced. The stars overhead dimmed noticeably, guttering in their frozen courses.

From the Tower came the clamour of the broken bells attempting their cracked chime.

For a moment, he caught Shonnzi's eye. A remnant of the thoughts they once shared came into his mind.

It is almost time.

Shonnzi ran at the edge, out into the empty air, arms and legs flailing, and was gone.

17: Mutatis Mutandis

Listen, Ace!

She hardly noticed the smooth metal buttress that rose slowly up to hit her. The solid air grated the breath out of her lungs. Down the face of the Watch Tower she went like an ant on a playground slide, her head usurped by someone else's memories and dreams that had nowhere better to go.

The Doctor's memories were feeding into her mind.

A moment. A single flute was playing somewhere. A gentle, slow, dreaming sound, recalling fields of tall, still grass on Lungbarrow mountain before haytime; the baking wash of Elysian sunshine that warmed him through to the bones; a golden-winged beatitude fly that hovered lazily from one nodding pool of nectar to the next. The scent of hot, dried Gallifreyan earth.

His cousins, full-grown babies born from the family Loom. Yet even *they* laughed occasionally, lured from the dust-webbed halls of the brooding House on lushberrying trips in the summer woodlands.

And no dinner for those that old Housekeeper Satthralope found out. The arch tyrant of his youth with her clay pipe, wispy beard and twenty-way mirrors.

" *Only a doctor! Wretched child. Such a disappointment to the family and to the House!* "

A memory frozen in music played on the instrument of imagination. Without changing its tone or metre, it could set myriad moods, a commentary on whatever scene it accompanies. A gesture of the hand makes it a courtly dance. A glance of the eye makes it a union of love. A single tear makes it the messenger of death.

The timeless music of Time. A line of cool melody from the flute, like the wind singing, so calming, so persuasive, so frightening. Both objective and deeply subjective. The fretwork on which perception is hung. Make of it what you will, the flute plays on.

A tall woman slowly made her way across the grey plain. A grey shawl covered her head in the ancient manner.

On her arm she carried a jar, a two-handled amphora decorated with figures frozen for eternity in a scampering dance. She reached the long black crack that split the plain across. Gently she inclined the jar. From its lip fell a trickle of dust.

As the endless, timeless flute melody played, she stood pouring the glinting dust into the bottomless crevasse. Just as the Mother Goddess of the Old Time legends had poured Time itself into the void of the empty Universe.

The same tune stirring different memories. The dust of Time glittering like falling mirrors, trickling like sand in an hourglass. To stop it you might more easily stand a Pythia on her head.

Hurry up, Ace. You're supposed to know when it's time.

The Doctor is waiting, and the door is sliding shut. It is 11:58.

Someone was shaking her.

"Come on, Ace. Wake up. It's time!"

She resisted. The air had a chill. Her mind clung sluggishly to the safety of her dream rather than face the virtual nightmare of reality. Alice, in the book she'd been reading, was told she was just part of the sleeping Red King's dream and when the King woke up, she would go out

— bang! — like a candle.

Someone was tugging her up by her arm. She stumbled blearily after him along a dark street. "Leave off. What are you doing? How did I get down?"

"With extreme difficulty," said Shonnzi. He flourished a selection of foil-wrapped biscuits at her as they ran.

Idiot, she thought and told him so.

"Please yourself." He turned and dragged her on faster.

"You fell, I jumped," he said. "Some sort of energy field carried you down. I latched on to its tail." He dragged her round a sharp corner into another street. "Seen the Doctor yet?" he asked as he went.

She had spent months trapped in Iceworld, picking up pidgin Galaxpeke and pigbin Orculqui. She could say with some pride that she could swear fluently in eleven alien languages. But Shonnzi wasn't worth the effort. Not in this mood.

Her back and legs ached and her hand stung with friction blisters — like burn-up experienced on re-entering reality. The other hand was clamped into a fist shape. With a will of its own, its fingers resisted her attempts to open it.

Something glinted in its clamped palm.

"Just stop a minute, will you!"

"Nearly there.

"I said, stop!" She ground her feet into the dust and refused to move.

"We don't have time, Ace."

She gave up on her hand. "I'll tell you what got us down.

It's the TARDIS. The Doctor's ship. This happened before, when it was in trouble. It summoned us to help. It's sort of alive."

"So?"

"I thought it was destroyed. But it can't have been. It must be round here somewhere. Once we find the TARDIS, we'll find the Doctor, I know we will."

There was a flash of light overhead, followed by a barrage of crackles. One of the stars had exploded in a cascade of plumed mauve sparks.

The ground thundered again. The buildings around them creaked and swayed. The broken dome of the atrium rose nearby. They were close to the place that the dark phantom had guarded.

"It's time, Ace. We have to find the TARDIS now or it's too late."

"But how? *I* don't know how!"

"He said, the Doctor told me, that the answer would come to find us."

"In a dream?" she said in disbelief.

Another tremor. Her hand jerked up and the fingers opened themselves. In Ace's palm sat the TARDIS key. She must've pulled it out of her pocket. Or caught it as it jumped out.

Shonnzi seemed to understand. "You stay here. I'll send for help from the grumblies." He started to run up the street.

"What?"

"The other Phazels. They have to be fetched. Don't you understand, Ace? It's deliverance!"

He was gone before she could argue. Typical! You could tell who'd taught him a few things, like leaving stupid girls behind!

The key fizzed in her hand. It had started to glow with a cold, pale blue light. When she pointed it in a different direction, it glowed brighter.

She started to follow the track, using the key like a metal detector. The glow grew stronger as she moved down an alley and out into a small deserted street.

The tremors were increasing. Outlets had appeared along the street, streamering off steam like New York sewer vents.

She came to a halt at a dead end. Nowhere to go, even though the key was glowing fiercely. At first she looked for a bleached grey police box, and then just a keyhole. But there was nothing.

Only when she looked up the building did she see the trapdoor — halfway up the wall and out of reach. Across it lay the ladder, horizontal and strapped to the wall. She was sure it was part of the TARDIS. It was the attic, somehow jettisoned or deleted from the ship. Impossible to get at.

Lightning from the clear sky accompanied the latest tremor. The buildings creaked. At the end of the street, she saw Shonnzi, the light flickering off his red hair. He was facing away from her. She ran towards him and he turned to meet her. He grabbed viciously at her arms. It was Vael.

"Got you again, you little troublemaker."

She bit him on the wrist and pulled free.

Up the shaking street she ran with him right behind her.

She felt his grip yank on her jacket. The key flew out of her hand. He sent her spinning across the street and lunged for the fallen key.

With a flying tackle, Shonnzi burst out of the shadows.

He caught Vael off balance, their heads cracking together as they met.

They threw up a cloud of dust, rolling across the ground in a knot of hatred. Above them, the buildings rocked in the tremor. With a roar, the steam vents erupted round them.

Columns of steam forced up hundreds of feet into the atmosphere like blasts from volcanic funnels.

Ace scooped up the glowing key. She looked up and yelled as the wall with the attic teetered and toppled down on them.

A crash and a shower of loose stone were drowned by the roar of the steam. The upper wall had fallen forward as if hinged. It lay resting like a new ceiling overhead, balanced on the building opposite. But the trapdoor and ladder were still out of reach.

Vael made a lunge at Ace. She felt his eyes burning hatred into her. Shonnzi's arm wrenched him back. "Go on, Ace!" he yelled in a frenzy. "It's time!"

One end of the ladder clattered down to the street. Ace ran up the steps, leaving them brawling in the dust and steam. She started to force against the trapdoor. Dust trickled down around her. The door wouldn't move.

There was a keyhole set at the door's edge. She had hardly fitted the glowing key into place before the door flew up with a crash and she jack-in-the-boxed into the darkness above.

The roar of the steam and the distant clang of the Tower bells vanished. It was peaceful here. Still and calm. A single flame, with neither candle nor lamp to feed it, was fixed in the air. It imbued the room with a golden aura, an atmosphere so familiar from the vanished TARDIS. The sloping walls were raftered like the inside of a roof. This

was the attic where Ace had never been. It smelt of pine resin. A good place for contemplation and dreaming. If this was the last remnant of the ship, then Ace was certain it was also the source from which all the apparitions had emanated.

A figure was seated in a rocking chair — the only item of furniture. Cobwebs clung to him. Off his lap jumped the silver cat. It ran startled into the shadows.

As Ace approached, the Doctor's head nodded up and his eyes opened.

She had a frightened glow inside, but this time she knew she wasn't wrong. At last everything was going to come together. "Doctor?" she said gently.

He scrutinized her for a moment and then shuddered.

His head turned slowly back and forth as he took in his surroundings. Through the open trap in the floor silent lights flickered and wisps of steam crept in.

The Doctor sniffed and frowned at her again. "Well," he said, "and what sort of Time do you call this?"

18: Future Imperfect

The older Process forced its bloated body forward. "Now disrupts!" it spluttered, breathless as it struggled to match the speed set by the younger creature.

The monsters arched their way along the outer spiral of the Tower. In the iron skeleton of the edifice, the engines pulled against each other. Wheels jarred and juddered.

Chains splintered and flailed in murderous spirals. A repeated clank came from one of the broken bells as its mechanism jammed in a parody of frozen time.

"Are these your rumours?" croaked the younger.

The older Process ignored the jibe. It swung its head to stare out over the grey City. "This Now is new. Before, this Now never exists. Not when this Process was you. In my memories, it is not here."

"It is Now," the younger insisted.

Thin jets of steam spurted into the sky from all over the tangle of disparate buildings below. The City trembled as all points in its Time flung their protest into the sky. Already a billowing thunderhead cumulus was forming, mixing with the smoke nebula that hung amongst the coloured stars. The storm cloud loomed over the City, flickering with light from within.

"Omens," warned the older Process. "Ill portents. The Doctor, he returns. The guards, what do they report?"

They listened to the chattering messages of alarm that rose from across the City.

A guard on the City's main artery had seen a wall of cold fire that moved slowly north towards the Dial Square.

On the grey bank near the millwheel, a guard reported a host of shrews that ran squealing into the flood of the mercury stream.

In a courtyard near to the southern delta where all the streams met, a grey clock had climbed from its plinth and scuttled away on its hands.

On another artery, a sudden wind had whipped up the dust into a cloud. It circled three times in the shape of a carrion bird and flew off into the stars.

The older Process's fins rippled with rage at the news.

"The Guard Captain, where is it?" it demanded. "Where is its report?"

News chittered back.

The Captain clung to the parapet of a spired building as it shook in the tremor. He watched the Phazels below him. It was the older group, far from their designated work location without leave. They moved through the grey shadow-streets with a purpose that suggested they had been summoned either by design or instinct. Either way, their usual subservience had been overcome by a boldness that would be their downfall.

"These omens, they are not ill fated," declared the younger Process.

The elder's beady eyes stared from around its slobbering mouth. "For who? Now disrupts. The birthright, it must be secured. The Doctor returns!"

"You grow too old to see. These signs foretell what we seek. The Future. At last, it emerges!"

"Then you should be afraid."

At first there was a hint of suspicion in the way he eyed her.

"Come on, Professor. You're needed," she said.

"Kneaded? What do you take me for? A loaf of bread?"

His voice was weary and slow. He had not moved from the chair. His hair was dishevelled and there were silver beads like mercury in the crossply of his pullover. "This is too soon," he muttered. "Much too soon."

His eyebrows furrowed as he studied her. She wasn't convinced he knew who she was. She crouched in front of him and attempted a comforting smile — the sort doctors use. It came out completely forced.

"Take it easy, Professor. It's me, Ace. You've had a bit of a shock. We both have. I don't know what happened to the TARDIS, but I reckon we can find it again if we both keep ..."

She tailed off. He wasn't listening to her. He stared at the floor with a blank expression.

"I don't know what you've been up to," she heard herself saying. "But you didn't half stir things before you disappeared. You got yourself a reputation."

She stopped again. She was babbling uselessly, just to get some response. But she had never seen him so frighteningly passive. She brushed a cobweb off his shoulder and touched the back of her hand against his forehead. "You don't have a temperature anyway."

"I don't?" He suddenly looked alarmed and pressed his own hand to his head.

"I mean it's normal, that's all," she stuttered.

"Oh ... normal." A gentle smile played across his face.

"How strange. I'm not sure I've ever been normal before." He looked directly at her and then his eyes twinkled.

It was like a signal. She flung her arms around his shoulders and hugged him. "Where've you been?" she choked through her tears. "You don't know the things I imagined."

After a moment his hand patted her cautiously on the shoulder. She pulled back and studied his face — just checking that all the details were still there.

"Tell me about it," he said.

She had grown used to this. His little tests, designed to build up her skills and awareness. Or so he always said.

"Right," she agreed and sat down cross-legged at his feet. "You know about the City, yeah?"

After a moment, he said, "Tell me from your point of view."

"Right." She fathomed her thoughts. "It's well weird out there. It's not just one city. It's like the same city again and again. Like the past and future all mapped out alongside each other. Time and Space must be seriously scrambled

..." She paused, waiting for him to wince at her vernacular, but the idea was more important than the correct scientific appraisal.

He was pulling intently at another strand of cobweb.

"Concurrent Time strands," he suggested.

"That's right. Like living next door to last week. It's all tumbledown — a sort of grey no-go area. And there's two really gross megaworm things that control it from a big tower that's like an accident in a Meccano factory. And these worms, they're called Processes or the Process or something, are looking for the Future."

He raised an eyebrow. "The Future?"

"Pretty stupid, eh?" she grinned. "But they've got a slave gang out there taking the place apart. I mean how can you search for the Future?"

"Why not?" he said and leaned back in his chair. His smile intensified as he mused on the conundrum. She could almost see his mind starting to gallop. "These Process creatures of yours must be metaphysicians of a high order. I wonder if they'd spare me the time

for a little chat."

"You've got to be joking, Professor," she exclaimed.

"Hold them up to the light, not a brain cell in sight. I'll tell you what though. I reckon it was them that attacked the TARDIS."

"The TARDIS," he said slowly.

"And they've had it in for you since the Beginning."

"They have?"

"You had a fight with one of them. You must remember.

They say it's you that nicked the Future in the first place."

"Me?" he said, checking his trouser pockets. "Did I?"

She grinned. "You've got a bit of a reputation out there."

"Good or bad?"

"Depends. But I've been working on it."

"How do you know all this?" he said, plainly flattered.

"Were you there?"

"You know I wasn't."

"Then how?"

"The Phazels told me. The slave gang. The old grumblies tell this story of your fight with the Process and how you got beaten up and did a runner. They tell it like some sort of ancient myth."

"The old grumblies?"

"Yeah, well, the young versions are a bit iffy. But then they've only just got here, haven't they? So they're bound to be a bit confused."

"Oh, yes," he said and smiled sympathetically.

"And another thing. You realize the Phazels are from Gallifrey. I mean they're Time Lords. But then you'd know that from Shonnzi." Her eyes flickered with anger for a moment. "You could have talked to me instead of him, you know. I thought you trusted me."

"Yes," he said. "Of course. Sorry."

Struth, thought Ace, either he's seriously out of his hat, or things have taken a turn for the better. She couldn't remember ever hearing him apologize to anyone before.

The next thing had to be tackled with a degree of caution. "The thing is ... erm, they sort of expect you to sort it all out. I mean, I tried, Professor. But well, you know ..."

"So you keep saying," he declared. "Is that all I need to know?"

"Well ... you're better at this sort of thing than I am."

"I see. There's just one or two points I'm a bit hazy about."

"Like what?"

He smiled as if to allay any fears, but it looked like a brave face, speedily plastering over the cracks. "Phazels and grumblies and Time Lords," he said. "And this *Gallifrey*.

Who exactly is he?"

Ace swore loudly. An expletive in Binary O1-serien that sounded like an angry phone number. She'd forgotten she knew it and had never really known what it meant, but it sounded agreeably damning. Even the Doctor looked startled.

She was in it up to her eyebrows and she hadn't a clue what to do next.

There was a clatter on the wooden steps outside. Ace spun round to stare at the trapdoor in the floor, dreading whatever was going to emerge from the world outside.

A head, plastered down with soaking red hair, appeared.

It eyed them for a second and broke into a wide grin.

"Shonnzi," Ace exclaimed.

"You found him then," he said.

"Yeah. I found him. Where's Vael?"

Shonnzi touched his swollen lip and said, "Cleared off."

He climbed up into the Doctor's attic and shook his head like a terrier emerging from a pond. A spray of water fanned outwards through the air. His clothes were drenched.

"What happened to you?" Ace said.

"I think it's called rain. Come and see."

"Later." She tried vaguely to block his way, but he was already pushing past. He peered shyly at the Doctor.

"I brought these," he said, holding out the battered hat and rod.

To Ace's horror, she found that the Doctor had climbed out of his chair and was advancing unsteadily towards the newcomer. "How do you do?" he said, switching into his most genial mode. He took the hat and rod and studied them curiously. "Mine?" he asked.

" *You* gave them to him," Ace said sharply.

"Ah."

Shonnzi looked uncomfortable and said, "Well, you dropped them really. But you said I could have them ... in a dream."

"Did I?" said the Doctor, impressed. "You must be ..."

"Shonnzi," said Shonnzi.

"Yes. I'm ... erm. I'm ... My friend here ..."

"Ace," snapped Ace.

He waved a gracious hand. "Thank you. You're very kind. Perhaps you'd deal with the introductions."

"You're the Doctor and she's Ace," Shonnzi said.

"Thanks," Ace said flatly. Her annoyance made her feel immensely guilty.

"Are you coming down, or what?" said Shonnzi. "They're all waiting."

"What for?" she said.

"For me, of course," interrupted the Doctor with a smile.

"Don't make such a fuss. I have a reputation to live up to. So let's go and find out exactly who I am."

"Professor!"

He marched towards the trapdoor and Shonnzi stood clear to let him pass. Ace ran after him, praying that she could bluff their way out.

As she came down through the door, the City hit her in the face. Sound exploded round her. The shock was almost deafening. The streets drummed with falling rain. Water gushed from the tops of the gutterless buildings. It splashed down into the thoroughfares, turning the dust to mud. The air was washed deliciously clean and rich.

From the top of the steps, Ace saw what looked like a clump of shining coloured mushrooms. Despite the clouds, there was still light from somewhere.

"Ready," called Shonnzi from behind her and the coloured umbrellas swayed apart to reveal the drenched Phazels underneath. They gave a loud huzzah. It was the older group — the grumblies. Their drab clothes were gone.

Instead, they were arrayed in a bizarre mix of clothes, all random in bright colours and styles. Reogus, dressed in a blue tunic with yellow fleurs de-Lis, raised a sort of bugle to his lips and blew a wild elephantine fanfare. The instrument spluttered as the warm rain got into its valves. There was little shelter under the new arch formed by the collapsed wall. But they were not deterred. Reogus burst out laughing and threw the bugle into a puddle. They hurried eagerly up to meet the Doctor. Chesperl in green, Amnoni Distuyssor in rich scarlet and Reogus, all laughing under their makeshift coloured canopy of umbrellas. Only Pekkary held back, standing under his black brolly, awkward in his maroon jacket. His lank hair was pulled across his blank eye.

The Doctor walked happily into their midst and was festooned with bedraggled garlands made out of old newspaper. "Welcome, welcome!" they kept repeating.

Ace stood a little way back, a nagging suspicion that this outburst was badly mistimed.

Shonnzi took her arm. "Come on, beanbag," he said and pulled her down the steps. "It'll be all right. This is what we've been waiting for. It's no place for a child to grow up."

"A child?" she said and remembered the skinny ginger-haired kid. The kid who had the same coloured hair that he had. "You mean ... you?" Time was a mess in this place all right. A real mess where the past caught up with you and you had to look after yourself.

"Not just me," he said darkly, but then his face brightened. "You said the Doctor'd rescue us. It's redemption at last."

The Doctor, already drenched, was laughing too. The rain streamed down the Phazels' upturned faces as they danced in a joyous ring around him. Shonnzi pulled Ace into the circle and she was surrounded by smiles. The downpour ran through her straggled hair. She felt cleansed. Her relief at finding the Doctor at all got the better of her forebodings over his state of mind.

"Quennesander Olyesti," Amnoni called to Pekkary, her superior demeanour washed away. "Don't be such a wet vest. Come and join in."

He smiled weakly and allowed himself to be dragged into the dance. They splashed and laughed and twirled their umbrellas. And the Doctor stood at their centre, content to watch their celebration.

They stopped as suddenly and instinctively as they had started. With a degree of ceremony, each of the Phazels closed their coloured umbrellas. One by one, they laid them at the Doctor's feet like religious icons before a saint.

He said nothing. Either he was still confused or reluctant to disrupt a ceremony that was clearly important to the Phazels. The rain had begun to ease. The cloud overhead was gone and with it the smoky nebula. The stars burned like torches.

Ace saw Chesperl and Reogus whispering together.

"Yes, I want to," the young woman kept insisting. They turned and approached solemnly through the last spatterings of rain.

"Doctor," Chesperl said nervously, "if you are to bring deliverance from this place to us, Reogus and I have one boon to ask from you."

"Ah," said the Doctor and he began to look uncomfortable.

Reogus had taken hold of Chesperl's hand. "We may have misjudged you in the past, Doctor," he blustered. "But we bear you no ill will now." The heavy man was awkward with words, but his exuberance

was overwhelmingly genuine. He almost shook with emotion like an Italian tenor.

Ace was touched, and relieved he didn't sing.

"This world is no place to bring up a child," he said.

Ace turned to Shonnzi with a look of disbelief. He took and squeezed her hand.

Reogus looked to Chesperl to continue. "We would ask you to be the Gods-guardian of our child when it is born,"

she said.

"And we hope it won't be here, Doctor," added Reogus quickly.

The Doctor gave a worried smile. Ace could see him almost squirm as the focus of this deeply private request.

Around them, the buildings dripped balefully. The stonework and streets, dry for so long, were already absorbing the surface water.

"I think," the Doctor said, "that you may be talking to the wrong person."

The returning silence was broken by a series of clattering crashes. All around them, windows in the grey walls were flung open. The red insect-helmeted guards, their eyelets bristling, stared and chittered down at the Phazels.

A figure stepped out on to a balcony above them. "It's a long time since I was invited to a party," called Vael.

"You weren't asked because you weren't wanted,"

retaliated Ace.

The Phazels had bunched together around the Doctor.

He looked dangerously close to introducing himself again, but Ace laid a firm hand on his arm and muttered, "Save it, Professor."

"Now it's back to Professor," he complained. "I wish you'd make up your mind."

"I wish you'd find yours."

Pekkary had stepped forward, his face grim. "Vael Voryunsti, call off the guards," he warned.

"Not a chance," said Vael with quiet confidence.

The Phazel Captain stood firm. "There will be no more co-operation, Vael. Time is altering in the City. The Processes no longer have any control over us."

Silence. The creatures stared impassively down from their watch places. The washed air was fresh with expectancy.

Ignoring the others' pleas, Reogus broke from the ranks of the group. "Do you know what you are?" he railed at the guards. "Do you remember what you *were?* Do you? Well, it's over. You'll be free of it too. The Doctor's here now. He's come back!"

A whip cracked close by. At the head of the street stood the shape of the Guard Captain. Reogus stepped forward, eager to challenge the brute, but the other Phazels pulled him back.

The Guard Captain advanced slowly, chitinous armour scraping, until it stopped a few yards away. A potent threat, but they did not shrink from its malign alien chittering.

"The Doctor, where is he?" it croaked.

"Wait," said Vael from above. "Time to parley."

Ace was astonished as the Phazels suddenly moved into a cluster.

"Ask him what his terms are," Amnoni advised Pekkary.

Their Captain shook his head. "If we parley, we must have terms of our own.

"But it will take too long to decide," said Chesperl.

"We must remain a crew," insisted Pekkary. "We work together."

The Doctor was smiling with benign vagueness, but his eyes were darting everywhere as he took every available ounce of information on board. Ace followed his gaze and saw that the guards had vanished from the windows.

Shonnzi, growing increasingly infuriated, had noticed as well.

"I'll take them on single-handed if need be," announced Reogus.

"Stupid bloody grumblies!" Shonnzi exploded. "Don't you ever do anything?"

"I'm waiting," said Vael from the balcony.

"No parley!" shouted Shonnzi. "Tell the worms, if they haven't managed to work it out for themselves, that there's an alternative to their world. The Doctor here has the Future

..."

"Hang on a minute," cried Ace.

"... and he's going to lead us out of this hellstrom hole and take us home!"

Vael made a loud scoffing noise. The Phazels and guards looked at the Doctor. Silence. "Go on then," said Reogus. "Do it."

Ace held back. It occurred to her that she wanted to see how he was going to react. He needed to prove himself.

The Doctor was shaking his head sadly. "I fear that was a presumptuous and very rash statement to make, Shonnzi.

You may all regret it."

"Take them," said Vael and he did not disguise his relish.

Doors opened and the guards issued on to the street.

"You can't attack us," warned Pekkary. "You know that's not permissible in the rules."

The chittering creatures, making mockery of their prey in encrusted shape and angular movement, started to close in.

Their clustered anemone eyelets rippling under the currents of their Process masters' will. A power channelled through their brutal Captain and directed by the cruel and treacherous overseer on the parapet above.

"Up here!" yelled Ace, and she started to push the Doctor and the Phazels in their heavy, sodden clothes up the steps towards the trapdoor.

"Reogus!" shouted Chesperl from halfway up, as he scooped up a rock. He hurled it at Vael, who ducked instinctively from practised experience. Reogus cursed and ran up the steps for cover.

"I want him!" shouted Vael.

A scorpion whip cracked through the air and coiled round Reogus's ankle as he reached the top. He stumbled back, striking his head against the edge of the trap, and fell the length of the ladder.

His massive frame lay face down in the mud.

Chesperl cried out and ran back down.

In the street, the advancing guards froze in their tracks and were silent. Vael leaned over the balcony in apparent desperate concern. Like terrified kids, thought Ace, when a game gets murderously out of control. Behind her, the other Phazels waited. The Doctor stood beside her, watching intently.

Reogus's hand moved for a second and then was still.

Chesperl fell forward with a shriek.

One of the guards, a massively built creature, stood shaking and bewildered as its fellows backed away from it.

Then it simply dissolved into thin air like candle smoke and ceased to exist.

The other creatures clutched their claws to their insect heads and let up a chorus of raucous chittering. Vael yelled after them as they fled away up the street.

The horror struck at Ace. "What's happening?" she whispered.

"I said it was too soon, much too soon," muttered the Doctor and then he tensed. His voice suddenly took on the old authoritarian tone that she had longed for. He looked down at Chesperl, weeping over her dead lover. "Destroy the present and the future ceases to exist," he said.

He stalked down the steps. "Vael Voryunsti!" he called.

His slight form, dripping hair matted down, clothes wringing wet, was suddenly a focus of power. An opposition to all the nothingness, the *miehrrvre* of this place, a world apparently dead before it had even

lived.

"Take a message to your masters. Tell them that *Wilby* is here. Tell them that *Wilby* challenges them for control of the City! And inform them that I am *Wilby!* "

Vael sneered and didn't wait to hear any more. He turned and vanished from the balcony. The other Phazels were descending the steps to gather around the body of Reogus.

Ace didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Doctor *Wilby?*

she asked incredulously.

The Doctor looked sternly at her and snapped back,

"Will be the Doctor!"

19: Superstrings

Vael ran until his body ached. Mud splashed up his stolen moleskin trousers. He was driven by terror. He had to be the first to reach the Tower.

The Processes could draw on a bottomless pit of rage, a black lake of hatred and undernourished greed that drove them. Only Vael understood that. Only he had the wit to feed them just enough morsels and hold a final cataclysm at bay.

He had saved the Phazels' lives more times than they'd ever know — and for all that he received only curses and ingratitude. But he could only imagine the revenge the Processes would wreak on the mutinous guards. The monsters followed their own instincts, fighting between themselves as readily as they might turn on their slaves.

The death of Reogus Teleem only emphasized the dilemma. Since the Beginning in the first Phase of the City, he, Vael Voryunsti Sheverell, had walked free. He need only jump a silver stream to see five young Phazels grown old in the enslavement of the Processes. But a doom hung over him too. In the Tower, he had seen his own future: a comatose weakling wound in a cocoon as a surety of his cooperation.

Counting Captain Pekkary, there had been five Phazel slaves. He had walked free. Yet there were seven insect-head guards, counting their Captain, snatched from the third and oldest Phase of the City.

So there was no hope at all. Not for any of them.

At any moment he expected the scream of rage as the Processes discovered the latest reverse to their plans. He rounded a corner and came in sight of the looming Tower.

Bells clanked, chains ground, anvils rang. And in Vael's head came a shriek — not the cry of an angry beast, but the lost wail of a woman from another world whose eyes burned in his head.

He fought it off, struggling to subdue the latest onslaught in its endless attempts to pierce his mind. His thoughts were tinged with blood, they tasted in his mouth. He gasped and fell senseless into a doorway.

You fool, you reject your own world!

"I thought Time Lords could regenerate when they died,"

said Ace.

"Really?" said the Doctor — or *Wilby* as he kept reminding her. "Fascinating."

She shook out her damp hair again and refused to despair. She had tried to explain things to him, but it grew more difficult. She was realizing too fast and too late that she knew precious little about him herself. His home and origins, even his name, if he really had one, were a complete mystery. How old was he? And what decimal point of his life had she knocked around with him for? Anything she thought she knew, she might have just dreamt.

But there must be things written down somewhere.

Letters addressed to him or Christmas cards. She gave up on the idea that he ever filled in forms or kept a diary.

Anything like that was probably lost or scattered across the City when the TARDIS exploded.

As it was, the Doctor, *Wilby* the Doctor, whatever he wanted to call himself, seemed to forget everything she told him within five minutes of hearing it.

They sat away from the Phazels, reluctant to join in the elaborate ritual that formed a eulogy for Reogus. His pockets were sifted. Each remembered item honoured. The Doctor looked awkward. He busied

himself making a plumbline from a piece of string weighted with one of Shonnzi's finger biscuits.

"You're from Gallifrey too," Ace went on impatiently.

"Gallifrey's a planet, Professor. I told you. It's your home.

Have you forgotten that as well?"

The Doctor sighed and intoned, "And when I got there, the cupboard was bare."

"Then why did you challenge the Process?"

"Ah."

"Well?"

"I was pushed," he said pointedly. "And it seemed like a good idea at the time. Tell me about your home," he added and seemed alarmed by her scowl.

She couldn't just sit there. "If you're going to meet the Process, shouldn't we be preparing a trap or something?"

He tutted, held up the plumbline and squinted at the tall grey buildings that surrounded them. "Look at this," he complained, passing her the string. "Worse than that ridiculous tower in Pisa."

Sometimes he really riled her. "You remember some things then." She held up the plumbline and was too startled to notice any reply.

Seen against the straight line of the string, the threat of the illusion she had grown used to was renewed. As the City rose in an upward curve around them, the buildings tilted inwards more and more alarmingly.

"String is a very important thing," said the Doctor.

"Something to remember."

Claustrophobia clamped in again. She wanted to hide —

no, not hide, she wanted to smash her way out.

The City was fixed on the inside of a sphere.

"Professor," she said quietly. "Where are we?"

The Doctor smiled hopelessly at her and shook his head. "If only I could remember, erm..."

"Ace," said Ace.

"Yes... Ace."

"Right," she said. "You'd better leave the trap to me."

The moans of the funeral stopped. A distant howl echoed from the direction of the Watch Tower.

The Phazels shifted uneasily, recognizing a summons.

In Ace's mind, it was a cry of unthinking animal rage.

To the Doctor, the man who would be the Doctor, it was the inevitable acceptance of his challenge. He pressed his fingers to his forehead and tried to remember what he had said. What was he doing there? Where and who was he? "I don't think I've lost my memory," he whispered. "I think it's been stolen."

"What I really need," said Ace, "is a couple of crates of nitro-nine. Then we could really talk business."

Shonnzi had been sitting close by, unable to face participating in the Phazels' ritualized wallow in misery.

"Time Lords are like that," he said. "Aren't they?"

The night crackled with frost. Above the twinkling inert lights of the City's Olmesian Quarter, Pazithi Gallifreya was a burnished sickle in the sky. To the west, snow clouds loomed on the horizon.

" *Those who plot the destruction of others, often fall victim themselves*."

Pelatov's Collected Sageries — an illuminated folio of the classical repository, surface bound in leviahide with a scroll-screen of tempered quartz. Limited edition.

Rassilon slid the volume to the back of his desk with mild irritation. The foreword he had been inveigled to input for the screen-tome eluded him. He found the philosopher brethren of the Third Century pompous in the extreme. It annoyed him to have to write some portentous frippery praising a long-dead scholar, who undoubtedly

bored his students five thousand years ago as much as he bored his readers today.

" *The Ancients have much to teach, but one should not dwell amongst them forever*."

Could anything from so long ago be held relevant to today's world? Pelatov had unwittingly damned himself.

There was only Now. Rassilon must never slide into that trap. It was abhorrent that any civilization could be founded on superstition and barbarism. These only weighed down any advance. But the Mythic schools, resembling and run like factories, dealt in holy lies and taught the children religious ignorance. They reinforced what was already in the dark Gallifreyan soul. The people must believe in something and so belief was supplied and readily packaged, and blood flowed readily in the holy Games.

Yet it was an honour to be asked for such an inscription.

But he might change his mind again tomorrow.

Pazithi the mystic, the virgin moon Goddess, still watched over them, and was still worshipped. Yet even with the antique telescope at his window, he could make out the industrial complexes that fouled her sacred surface with angled shadow — the dust-grubbers and smelting furnaces that raped her divine celestial beauty.

He tabbed through the pages of his journal. It had been a year to the day since his visit to the inner Temple. No one had seen the Pythia in that time. No public appearances or private audiences. Occasional bulletins stated that she was in good vitality, but as her 170th suncycle approached, she deemed it prudent to work on public affairs in privacy. Other duties were delegated to the closed ranks of her staff and the Court of Principals.

Rassilon's own information network was confounded by the barriers of officialdom that surrounded the Pythia. Her staff were unbribable and beyond infiltration.

After a lost harvest and a second winter that dragged on into spring, popular feeling was rising. The thought-pool of the City resounded with rumour and guttersniping. When the people were hungry and cold, their humour deepened to mask the unrest. The latest laboured riddle ran "When is the Pythia like a lost pipe-cleaner?" As yet Rassilon had failed to catch the punchline.

Most rumours said that the Pythia was dead and no successor had been named. But Rassilon still felt her thoughts, like waves of hatred directed at him. And the campaign of contrived slurs against his name was endless.

Amid his own public appearances and speeches, his journal reminded him that tomorrow he was due to see Prydonius again. This would be the third visit that the Hero had made to Rassilon's office above the west wing of the Academia Library. Prydonius was the last ally that Rassilon had expected, but the Admiralty was angry at the lack of funding for the Empire Fleets. They were further incensed that the Time Projects should be continuing after the loss of the Scaphe the year before.

" *A leader's greatness is best judged by the quality of her advisers*."

"Shut up, Pelatov, you obsequious groveller!" said Rassilon out loud. But the old philosopher had certainly known how to write a catchy sagery.

An alerter purred and a bubble retina glittered into the air above the desk. The face that appeared was all forehead with a squat little visage crouching by the chin. Thrift, Rassilon's freeman servant, his invaluable Tersurran factotum, won eleven years ago for a few treazants in a marketplace brawl game.

"Apologies meyopapa but listen we've a visitor in the Library. Curator system thought you'd better take a look in."

Thrift sneezed. The miserable frozen spring disagreed with his native equatorial constitution.

The bubble flicked to a view of the main hall of the Library seen from a panoptic high in the galleries. The building was closed for the night and the lights were dimmed. It took a moment for enhancers to lucidate the image. But Rassilon could see a hooded shape making its way across the central area.

"Came in straight through," said Thrift's voice over the scene. "All the doors just opened up by themself no argument."

"Ask the curators to keep the main hall clear," Rassilon said. "I'm coming down now. And Thrift?"

"Yes meyopapa."

"Run to the Temple and fetch two sisters here. Don't use the vidilink. Go yourself."

"Meyopapa it's snowing."

"Take my coat. The southern trader's fur cloak. They will understand. But hurry, Thrift."

In the main entrance to the Library, Rassilon found the confused group of night curators. The massive doors had been thrown wide open before the intruder's advance and would not close. All secure systems had been overridden.

The ghostly intruder, robed in blue, had passed into the main hall, ignoring their challenge. It had been wandering up and down the rows of ancient books so aimlessly that the panoptic security circuits were having problems following it.

From the main hall, the presence had moved into an adjacent section of the Library. It seemed to be seeking something.

Rassilon thanked the curators for their information and deliberately removed his shoes. He slipped quietly down into the hall through a back route. By night the Library was like a cavern system, echoing and lost in shadow. High in the galleries above, snow was drifting silently against the tall windows. He moved quickly. The marble floor was bitterly cold on his bare feet.

There were exhibits among the rows of shelves, ancient artefacts in dusty glass cases relating to the sections where they had been placed. Old bones and alien armour. In the half-light they seemed to be watching, returned to secret life at night once all the paraphernalia of the day was gone.

Rassilon heard her before he saw her. A voice raised in angry accusation, coming from several directions, bounced within the confines of the walls. He could not hear another voice.

He rounded a corner in the section devoted to the barbaric Empire of Thule, and saw her. The Pythia's back was turned against him. She was facing one of the exhibit cases and leaning on her sceptre-headed wand. She had levelled a finger at the object in the glass case as she railed at it.

"The door of the Future is shut. I cannot see beyond. I drag myself from day to day and can see no further than the instant. I might as

well walk backwards. Speak to me, wise one."

The severed head of the Sphinx stared at her from its case. Savage, feline eyes, frozen for more than a Gallifreyan year since a sudden death had overthrown its regime of riddles.

The Pythia laid down her wand and sat cross-legged on the floor before the head. Her tone was familiar, as if she recognized in the dead monster an old friend, an equal and ally. "They say that of all the augurers within the nine corners of the Universe, you see the furthest. It is true?

Hmm? Yet you submitted to the sword of a Gallifreyan Hero.

Did you not see?"

She paused and nodded to the head as if she heard some answer. Rassilon, shifting back and forth on his frozen feet, heard nothing. The grotesque shape in the glass case was just an object.

"Yes, that's true," the Pythia went on. "Perhaps you are farsighted. And the future that's close is transparent to you, so that you can see beyond." She laughed. An old crone's cackle — not the voice of a demigoddess at all. "Perhaps we both need spectacles."

A pearl of guilt that had rolled in Rassilon's mind for a year was growing. How much of the Pythia's state of mind was due to his own intervention? An act of egotistic mischief that another had warned him against. The dark tradition of millennia was instilled in his soul also. Was he the man to sever the ancient course of Gallifreyan history as surely as the hero sliced the monster's head from its spine?

"Time is changing," said the Pythia to the Sphinx. She rocked on her haunches like a wailing woman at a funeral.

"They would sweep away all the ageless lore with a cold and dismal practice that they call reason." The Library echoed her shriek of disgust. "Fools! They have machine-minds and do not fear the Gods. They say the Gods are dead and want to steal their thrones. I fear they will succeed. I, who am Gallifrey, must know. Tell me what you see."

Rassilon stepped closer to the hunched figure.

"Tell me, wise one!" the Pythia cried. She pressed her hands against the glass of the exhibit. "If they doom me, they doom the world. What is the future? Tell me!"

Rassilon fell forward with a cry of pain. His toe had stubbed on a shelf. He stumbled over in agony. The Pythia turned and a wave of hatred hit him like the hindward kick of a sagittary to his head.

"You!" she cried.

As he reeled under the blow, he saw the venerable Pythia, a decrepit old woman, struggling up with her wand like a spider on spindly arms and legs. Her eyes fixed him, eclipsing any other pain. They burned into his mind like knives. His lungs seethed with scorching air.

The jewels on her robe clinked and glittered like starlight. She was muttering a spell over and over as she scrambled closer. It sounded like "Vael, Vael, Vael..."

Rows of books spilled to the floor as he clutched at anything in an attempt to steady himself. He fell to his knees.

He could taste smoke and his body was scorching.

Then the attack ceased.

He tried to catch the air to cool his throat. He looked up, bewildered that he was not dead.

The Pythia stood over him. Tall, taller than him, even in her dotage — but then everyone was taller than him. Tears of anger ran down her wrinkled, golden face, "Vael is lost, little man," she said. "I cannot find him."

Out of her coiled hair she pulled a steel comb and lifted it to strike at him.

He caught her bony arm and tried to push her away. Her strength was frightening. The comb wavered close above his head.

There was a clatter of shoes on the marble floor.

Another arm, squat with white hair, dragged the Pythia clear.

She cried out and pulled free of Thrift's grip. Then she threw down the comb and crouched to the floor in a foetal knot.

Thrift pulled Rassilon to his feet. "Meyopapa you all right." It was a statement not a question. Tersurrans know about things like that.

Two sisters stood nervously behind, young adepts with snow still

clinging to their rust-red cloaks. Rassilon hauled himself up and tried to stand on his good foot. He coughed and cleared his throat several times before he could manage to speak at all. The Pythia ignored them all. She squatted, staring at the lifeless head of the Sphinx.

"Despite the rumours, your mistress is in shockingly good physical health," he croaked at the adepts. "I think you'd better take her home before she does someone an injury with her mind."

The Pythia, her face shaking and eyes staring emptily, pushed away the helping hands and got to her feet. She walked slowly out, followed by one of the sisters. The other adept, her hair like a torrent of red fire, lingered for a moment staring at the Sphinx head in the glass case.

"It's just a facsimile," said Rassilon. "Only exhibited in the Library while the real head is being studied and cleaned."

He watched the tall adept walk away between the rows of shelving. So cool-faced and so young and pledged to a lifetime of unworldly devotions. His toe began to throb, the overture to a whole concert of aches and pains throughout his body.

"Vael," he muttered. The name was vaguely familiar, but he could not quite place it.

From the thought-pool of the people he suddenly caught the punchline of the joke.

When is the Pythia like an old pipe-cleaner? When she's gone clean round the bend.

20: The Banshee Circuit

A fine mist had started to rise after the rain. The warm air, held at a constant temperature, was clammy and moist —

grey, as if the gaps between the buildings were slowly solidifying.

Shonnzi stood in the doorway of an isolated and tumbledown tower, avoiding the burial of Reogus that was taking place in a courtyard nearby. He had never seen death before, although he'd been told about it. Its sudden finality, a brutal snatching away of friendship and love, had stunned him. Threads were severed, leaving too much

unsaid and unfinished. Only grey sorrow and regret were left. Untold memories were lost forever. He wanted to run and leap the mercury stream, back to where his friend still existed, to start again.

No one answered his questions any more. The Doctor used to answer everything in his dreams, but now that the Doctor was actually here, it wasn't working out like that. It wasn't the Time Shonnzi had planned. He had brought Ace as he was told. Now the Doctor was supposed to put everything right. The Processes weren't going to sit gathering slime forever.

The Doctor had said, "Never judge the tea by the teapot, Shonnzi. And don't judge the teapot by the cosy. Always look at people from the inside."

When Shonnzi looked at the Doctor from the inside, a skill he had not lost from when he was a Pilot, he was confused. The Doctor who had taught him so much, was a traveller and a wise man with stories so enthralling and fantastical, they put the nursery tales of his old Babushka to shame. Better than the myths in the Book of Future Legends that they learned by rote at school, although the Doctor also told tales of the future —but he told them as if they were the past.

When Shonnzi looked inside the Doctor for this richness, there was nothing. The Doctor's mind was a maze of empty corridors and empty rooms. All bare boards and dust-webs. Shonnzi felt cheated. He had the feeling that Ace knew more than the Doctor knew. Even he knew more —

too much to understand. This Doctor, whom he and Ace had championed, was a real letdown.

Something had to be done for Chesperl too. Her grief stunned her for now, but the City was no place to bring up a child. Shonnzi knew that better than anyone.

Ace sat silently on the step of a ruined tower, waiting while the Doctor climbed the building for a better view of the City. He had found her a notepad in his trouser pocket and she was scribbling down her plans for what she called a Process trap.

Shonnzi was shocked by her cutting temper and her forthright opinions. He liked that. He was fascinated by her sleek brown hair, glossy in the starlight. As she leaned forward, the curving nape of her neck was covered by a thin film of the City's glinting dust. Shonnzi wanted to run his finger gently across the strange texture of her skin.

As she worked, she chewed on one of the biscuits he had given her. One of the latest batch that the kid had brought. It came from the TARDIS food machine, which lay in a hollow on the earliest Phase of the City. But on the next Phase, the machine was gone, carried off to the Watch Tower by the Guards. And on the farthest Phase, it lay discarded and lifeless outside the Tower, its food supply exhausted.

Shonnzi shuddered. Something had passed behind him, cold and lifeless. He thought of the dark spectral figure, its cloak swirling, an emanation of horror.

He dared to look and saw the silver cat vanishing up the stone tower's inner stairway.

Ace had not noticed. Her hand was fixed inside her jacket. Shonnzi knew she was fingering the plans with which he had been entrusted. The Doctor had told him that in his dreams. But that Doctor had raised a lot of expectations.

At first, Shonnzi had wondered why Ace was holding back on handing over the plans. Now he knew she was right.

This Doctor, this *Wilby* the Doctor, was not the Doctor he had seen in his dreams.

A fork of scarlet lightning lanced down from the stars. It froze, attached like a thin growth to the City that rose up to the West. The Doctor viewed it from the crumbled summit of the broken tower.

The sky boomed. Another bolt from the same source split the sky to the East. It lingered, angled against the first bolt like a jagged blood-red rainbow, a pair of God's compasses measuring out the world.

He heard the distant clank of the broken bells struggling to complete their chimes.

He wished he could remember half of what Ace, a very determined and volatile young lady who seemed to know him, had explained. She was also extremely uncouth, which he was embarrassed to admit that he rather liked.

The jagged rainbow was fading. Some information lingered in his memory. Information about other people and events. Anything about himself was less easy to grasp and retain. Ace complained that she had repeated things *loads of times* already. It worried him greatly. *Loads of Times* was a very disturbing anachronistic concept.

Chesperl and her baby worried him too. Children are the spirits of hope. But hope had nothing to do with the City.

He would eventually have to do something about the Process creatures he was expected to meet. But that could surely wait.

Thunder rumbled distantly. Or it could have been the ground. From his viewpoint, the Doctor studied the world in which they were trapped. A cacophony of grey buildings that pierced the layer of rising mist.

The City with no horizon rose around him in Stygian gloom on the inside of the sphere. Wherever he stood in this world, he would always appear to be at the bottom of a basin. Always standing at the pole, with the opposite pole some three miles away, curving like a roof directly above him. And at the centre of the globe was the sky, bright with flickering constellations; boundless space bound inside the tiny world. The universe, what he thought he remembered as the universe, had turned inside out.

He felt distinctly nauseous at the concept. Time was disrupted here too, running in a series of parallel strands that made up the structure of Space. It was tangling across its own boundaries. In his hearts, he could feel the inexorable approach of a disaster he could not define.

The silver liquid cat was suddenly beside him. It rolled on its back and looked up hopefully, so he crouched and dabbled at the curiously fluid and unreal texture of its tummy. The City had more riddles than a Sphinx had claws.

He must know where he was. And who he would be. Too many other lives depended on it. Ace had told him so. And they all looked to him for the answers.

Why did they all imagine he knew what was going on?

Ace said the Phazels were Time Lords. They denied it.

She said he was a Time Lord too. He didn't understand.

Perhaps she was confused. Perhaps she had stolen his memory. Why else should she keep telling him what he was supposed to know?

Or perhaps it was Shonnzi. The young man watched him all the time, as if he expected some miracle or revelation. His nature was too brooding, shot through with sudden bursts of manic enthusiasm. His

thoughts were constantly veiled. The Doctor would find it very difficult to get on with anyone like that.

And the others? Phazels and Processes? All monsters of one species or another. Why should he worry? He no longer cared what happened to any of them.

He left off playing with the cat and stood up, wondering where to start. The ground rumbled again. From the top of the crumbling tower, he watched the tiny figures on the ground below. The Phazels were grouped attentively around Ace. Shapes in the haze of thin mist. She seemed to be lecturing them.

He suddenly wanted this City, this penny-plain, penny-dreadful world, all to himself; to make of it what he could with no one else to interfere. It would be easy just to drop stones on all their heads and be on his own at last.

He gazed out across the world and saw a ripple running down through the curve of the City. This sort of thing was best viewed objectively. It was a fascinating sight. Buildings caught in the oncoming wave were rocking and crumbling like toys, as if trapped in the wake of some giant subterranean machine or a high-speed mole that burrowed beneath the City. The detail of advancing cracks and plumes of dust was easier to distinguish as the wave came roaring closer.

The Doctor held up the plumbline and watched intrigued as its trembling dance became more and more frantic. In the midst of all this chaos, he was certain he was searching for something, but it eluded him. If Ace had told him, which she insisted she had, then the memory had dropped repeatedly through the open grating that apparently constituted his mind.

His head was full of random nuggets of information that jangled loosely like the trembling walls around him: *Those whom God has a mind to destroy he first deprives of their senses*.

Never stand under a tree in a thunderstorm.

Never stand on a tower in an earthquake.

"Very sensible," the Doctor muttered as the building shook. A shower of dust hit him in the face and he slid across the parapet, flinging his arms wide to ward off the loose masonry that tumbled down around him.

Vael swung himself higher through the girders of the Watch Tower. The whole mountainous edifice was only a tangled lacework of iron girders. Easy to slip inside through the gaps between the churning engines and clanking chains.

He clambered up the struts and ran across the girders bridging the sections, not daring to look down.

The howl of summons to the Tower had dragged him back from the battle in his head. He knew what it meant. The Processes already had word about *Wilby*. Vael had to act quickly. The premonition of mortality that had been with him since he was a cadet had closed in like a cold breath on his neck. Not even a Pythia could save him this time. He had to do it himself.

Slipping through the Tower gantries, he had seen one of the guards stumbling in, drawn inescapably back by the summons. The others were still wandering aimlessly in the City, their so-called allegiance to the monsters crushed by the unforeseen death of Reogus and its deadly consequence.

To hell with the rest of them, Vael was only intent on averting his own doom and rescuing his own future.

"The World City, I myself created it!"

The older monster's unnerving whispered shrieks carried easily above the relentless clamour of the machinery.

"Far longer ago for you than this Process can remember," squealed its young counterpart.

"It will be rectified. The Phazels. They are not reliable.

More guards must be recruited. Wilby. He can be controlled and the stolen Future secured."

Scared witless, thought Vael, nervously wiping slime from his hand on to his jacket. He leapt on to a passing platform and was carried upwards to the level he wanted.

Ahead, he saw the torn cocoon where the little brat Shonnzi had been held. Beyond it was the thing he was seeking. The horrific object with which the Processes had taunted and controlled him. His own future: an older Vael bound in a mesh of glistening web.

He edged along the girder, balancing across the drop, and reached for the far side. His fingers clung to the scaffold in desperation. The cocoon that had encased him was tipped open. The weak body of the future Vael was gone, already dragged down to answer the Processes' summons.

He was cold sweat all over. From below, he heard the younger monster's voice. "The old guards, they are useless.

They must be replaced."

"No," croaked the older Process. "Only supplemented with fresh workers!"

Vael scrambled down the gantries, like an ounce-ape in the forest canopy, until he could see the platform where the Processes held their conference.

The two monsters were circling each other. Swinging each head with rage, footmouth arching over repulsive footmouth. The Guard Captain stood implacably in the centre of the area. Beside it was the guard, slumped exhausted on its knees like a sacrificial victim in the temples of Gallifrey. Two fresh cocoons were attached to one of the support struts. In the mesh of one, out of all possible reach, lay the skeletal shape that Vael knew he was doomed to become. And in the other?

Vael felt the flame of his anger rise in him. He wanted to blast the Processes now. He should have blasted them long ago, but the act still frightened him. It was reckless; losing control, flying blind, swerving the command frog and slinging it away. Wanting had nothing to do with it.

The Processes reared rampant against each other.

"Your world, it has failed!" cried the younger. "I shall start again! A new Now!"

The older creature slavered with rage. "Wilby, that is the cause. There is no more Now! Now will destroy you!"

"Then we are both destroyed!"

They hissed and spat like steam pistons, but the older Process was slowly driven back to the edge. Finally, it bowed its head and emitted a low groan of defeat.

The creature slithered away on its fins. It crawled over the side of the platform and was gone. The younger Process emitted a husky screech of triumph.

Vael slid from his perch and started to swing his way lower. Another platform passed him, cranking up towards the Process's dais. Two more guards slumped against each other, answering their final summons.

"Your duty, its term is almost ended," croaked the younger Process's voice. It was addressing the Guard Captain. "Recruit fresh forces."

Vael fumbled on the girder and nearly fell. He clung on until his fingernails ached, not daring to move or even think as the platform carried the Captain down past him.

"This is the Process's world!" came the exultant whisper from above. "A new Beginning, where it is reborn!"

By the time Vael reached the ground, the Captain was gone on its task. He ran along the walkway towards the entrance. No point in hiding or sneaking any more. He was damned. His own future had just lurched a step nearer. The engines in the walls seemed to pound faster with the changing of time.

Another figure lurched in through the gateway. It was the final guard, stumbling to its doom. The creature, eyelets flailing on its red insect helmet, came directly towards Vael.

He recognized its thin angular body, encrusted with growths of scabrous crustacean armour. His own future already lay trapped in a web high in the Tower. Now he was faced beyond that with his grotesque and ultimate destiny.

He cried out and caught at the demented creature, trying to pull it back. Its wild arms knocked him to the floor. It fell pitifully forward on to a platform and was carried upwards and away.

From above, Vael heard the exultant cry of the hungry Process. The Tower gate began to grind down like closing jaws. Vael hurled himself along the passage. There were any number of other ways out, but it must be this one.

With inches to spare, he rolled through the closing mouth. It boomed shut and he lay outside, weeping for himself in the dust.

Ace came pounding up the broken stone staircase with Shonnzi behind her.

"He must be up here," she was saying. "Professor!" she yelled as she rounded the corner out into the starlight. She skidded to a halt and stepped back, colliding with Shonnzi.

The wall of the tower had collapsed into a pile of rubble that smothered the uppermost floor. The cat was there on the fallen masonry. It threw her an accusing look.

"Go on, clear off out of it!" She waved an arm to frighten it off. "Bloody cat! There's nothing up here for you."

The creature yowled angrily like a Siamese. Its liquid form rose and darkened, flowing upwards into a silhouette that stood tall and gaunt above the ruin. Before, in the tunnels and in the Tower, it had been a dark and terrifying threat. This time its intensity focused on Ace and slammed home as a reality. It gave out an aura of coldness — a single-mindedness that might be interpreted as evil. A massive vulturine collar rested on its dark shoulders, surrounding the head whose barest outlines were traced in silver light. It had no shadow; it was all shadow. But its identity was unmistakable.

Ace shuddered under the spectre's stare. A blackness, like the sun too fierce to look at for long. Unutterable dread clutched into her. The Doctor had met a terrible fate and his spirit had returned to haunt her guilt.

Thunder rumbled like a slow peal of cosmic bells. The silver sketch of the Doctor's face was tortured and haggard.

Its eyes gleamed like white coals. It glided nearer, looming above her and Shonnzi. Again its hand stretched towards her.

There was a clatter of stones. The pile of rubble shifted and the Doctor, his face and clothes white with dust, began to clamber out.

"Miserable, insubstantial, jerry-built prefab!" he choked.

"Nothing's built to last these days..."

The dark wraith turned towards him and he faltered, momentarily lost for words.

The spirit seemed to grow still taller as it bore down on him. Its robe

swirled out like a rippling sculpture in a slow elemental wind. Its face was hidden from Ace by the collar, but its glaring eyes lit the Doctor's face as he stared up into them. His hand groped out to steady himself as he extracted his legs from the rubble. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" he said, dwarfed by the massive shape.

The ghost did not speak, it only stared implacably down at him.

"Wretched spirit, doomed to wander the dark causeways of the universe. What do you want with me?"

"Doctor! Can't you see what it is?" Ace dared to call out.

"It's you. It's your own ghost!"

The Doctor apparently ignored her. He stood nervously running the fingers of one hand around the girth of his wrist.

Suddenly she realized that he was checking his own pulse.

"Aren't you being a bit presumptuous?" he warned the ghost.

"Turning up unannounced like a spectre without a feast to go to! Just clear off! I'm not dead yet, you know!"

The two manifestations faced each other like duellists: one huge, darkly preternatural and doom-laden; the other urbane, dusty and doomed.

"Is it you that inhabit my mind?" cried the Doctor. "You that steal my memories? Speak, I charge thee!"

If the thunder was its voice, then it roared. Its robe flapped wide in the wind that they could not feel. A wind stirred by the passing of Time. The dark spirit glided to the edge of the tower. Its arms swept slowly out in an expansive gesture of rage that encompassed the whole City and the universe trapped at its centre.

"Yes," the Doctor confided, "I couldn't agree more. It's a miserable place, isn't it? No sense of proportion at all."

The spirit made a fist of its anger. In the air beyond the broken parapet, an oblong silver frame drew itself. Its empty centre flickered as it hovered like a hopeful TV screen.

"A reality window?" observed the Doctor with mounting irritation. "What good is a window with nothing to lookout at?

I want to know where I am. And exactly who I am too." His voice rose again into the Shakespearean cadence which was apparently the correct way to address errant ghosts.

"Return my memories, false spirit of this haunted wasteland, or I shall hurl thee into the sepulchasm of night from which there is no recourse! And return my TARDIS too!"

The air crashed as flickers of red lightning played in the stars.

"Professor," shouted Ace. "You remembered!"

The Doctor fell back on to the rubble with a startled look.

"Remember?" he said. "What did I forget?" He pressed his fingers to his temples with a look of mounting astonishment.

"Good grief!"

Ace quailed as the dark shape turned. Its arm moved inexorably out, levelling an accusing finger at her.

"Yes, yes," muttered the Doctor, deep in his rediscovered thoughts. "How many volumes does this CV

run to?" He looked up at the ghost. "But this still doesn't tell me who you are, or where my TARDIS has gone..."

His eyes followed the line of the spectre's dark arm, across its hand to the accusing finger. Beyond that, through the air, he saw the culprit and her accomplice cringing by the stairway.

"Hello Ace," he said as if he had just noticed her. "I think you may have something for me."

Her hand slipped tentatively into her jacket. "Are you all right, Professor?"

"Ace." He extended an open hand towards her.

Her hand closed around the scroll. "I looked after it, you know. I couldn't give it to you until I knew you were all right."

"Very commendable." He smiled and shook his empty hand. The smile was weary, but it brimmed with genuine affection. A smile for a true friend, presumed long-lost, who suddenly turned up out of the blue-grey, ready for a good argument as if she had never been away.

"And am I all right?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," she said sheepishly. "You're always all right."

She pulled out the slightly battered scroll and passed it to him.

"Thank you." He took it almost reverently, weighing it in his hands like some newly discovered treasure. Then he lifted it to his eye and squinted down the tube of rolled document. "The TARDIS greyprints," he said and his voice was full of a solemn wonder. "These are the multi-dimensional plans of the ship." The ribbon slipped itself undone and the document unrolled in his hands.

He looked at her sharply. "Where did you get them?"

"They popped out of the console at me. Just before the ship blew up.

"Ah. You were entrusted with them."

"I was?"

"Ace, you're the first person to see these since the TARDIS was in neural construction dock on Gallifrey."

Shonnzi leaned forward, intent on every implication.

Ace exclaimed, "But I thought you built..."

"Not exactly." The Doctor began to pore over the chart.

"I always knew there must be something like this. There were references to it in the TARDIS manual."

"Before the manual got eaten," Ace said.

"Eaten?" He looked up suspiciously at the apparition.

"Did it now. But perhaps I never needed the plans before.

They're sometimes known as the Banshee Circuits."

"Banshee Circuits?" said Shonnzi, his curiosity finally getting the better of his fear.

The Doctor's face clouded. "It's the last resort. When all other systems fail, the TARDIS falls back on one last chance. In an effort to survive, it uses whatever resources are available. People, places..."

"Dreams?" said Shonnzi, suddenly angry.

"Anything," the Doctor said sharply. "Including my memories."

The young man turned away and looked out over the hateful City. "I was used," he said, his voice sharp with pain.

Ace glared up at the baleful apparition. It still stood over them, its robe billowing out like a dark sail, a focus of rage and darkness. "Then who's the Ghost of Christmas Pudding?" she said. "I thought it was you. I thought you were..."

The Doctor shushed her into silence. He put his head down, drew the others into a huddle and whispered, "That is the Banshee."

"But it looks like you," Ace said.

"Pooh! Much too tall and cadaverous," he objected. "It's an embodiment of the instinct to survive, that's all. And I think it entirely misses my more endearing qualities. The TARDIS and I have a certain symbiotic affinity. Though I'm the imaginative one, and it's supposed to be me that's in control."

Shonnzi pulled away and returned to his scrutiny of the City. He looked deeply hurt. The silver frame still hung empty in the sky. The Doctor shrugged and said loudly,

"Well done, Ace and Shonnzi. We knew we could trust you.

If these had got into the wrong hands, we'd have been in real trouble."

Ace glanced at Shonnzi. He was staring with deep concern at something in the City below. "Don't tell me," she said, "we just imagined this lot."

The Doctor had a pained expression. "No. It's all too real." He was already busy trying to flatten out the greyprints across the rubble. "Now I wonder how this thing works."

"Not much good without a TARDIS, is it?" said Ace scornfully. "There's nothing on it anyway."

"Why do you think the Banshee's here?" snapped the Doctor and didn't wait for another botched answer. "It's here because my ship is lost and dying. The Banshee is the ghost of my TARDIS."

He took in their bewildered stares. Behind him, the dark spirit moved

uneasily. "If we don't find the ship soon, there'll be no way out of this place for any of us ever again."

"Then why don't you do something?" Shonnzi shouted.

"You should've stayed in your attic. At least in the dreams you knew what you were doing. The Processes'll finish us all off soon. They're up to something down there already."

"Watch it, mush!" weighed in Ace.

The Doctor looked surprisingly meek. "Perhaps you have something in mind?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Shonnzi snatched the document out of the Doctor's grasp and flung it over the side of the tower.

The Doctor stopped in mid-protest. The same elemental wind that gusted at the Banshee's robe caught the paper and lifted it through the air. It fluttered and smoothed directly into the hovering frame.

The grey of the document flickered like the scanner in the TARDIS. The tower began to shudder, releasing more rivulets of loose stone as the fearful apparition strode across the platform. Ace dodged its advance, pulling the Doctor and Shonnzi with her.

The Banshee reached the edge of the tower. It raised its arms again and repeated the gesture that took in all the world and its trapped universe. Thunder boomed.

"Hojotoho," observed the Doctor from the floor. "Very Wagnerian."

Ace clung to Shonnzi — not to him, he noted. He began to hum "The Descent into Nibelheim" to himself, because it was awesome and bombastic and seemed to fit the scale of the explanation he suspected they were about to witness.

Either the tower was shrinking or the frame, the reality window, was growing. It became immense, blotting out everything else, until there was only the grey and the tiny tower to which they clung.

The empty grey flickered like a pirate video. In its depths, a star began to shine. Then another emerged and then whole constellations, as if they were bobbing up to the grey surface. The whole sky was filled with the lights of a thousand celestial forges. Glittering and winking, pulsars and quasars, like a star city. And it began to shrink down so

that organized patterns became apparent. Bank upon bank of twinkling circuitry. Layer upon layer of calculated block transfer energetics, like a vast brain and nervous system.

Against the starscape stood the black shape of the Banshee Circuit.

There was a tremendous whoosh overhead that nearly floored them. A golden disc a metre wide overshot the tower, slowly turning as it fell into the distance. It was the forerunner. They crouched as the air began to scream.

Hundreds of the discs were rushing over the tower, tumbling into infinity like spilled gold coins.

Then the discs began to take on a design. Falling into row after row in a tight honeycomb configuration. Wall after wall forming into chambers and corridors behind which the glimmering star circuitry was stashed.

Ace reached across and squeezed the Doctor's hand.

"It's the TARDIS, Professor. We've got it back!"

"Where from?" he growled and gazed in amazement at the manifest powers of his ship. Glittering interface boundaries peeled into existence like a cortex around the inner Time-Space package. The transcendence of the dimensions. The infinite variety. The *Multum-in-Parvo* logistic. Battered blue-panelled walls slotted impossibly around the gigantic structure, reducing it to the paltry proportions of a common or garden British police box.

"Yeah!" shouted Ace and started to clamber up. The Doctor seized her jacket and yanked her down again.

"Wait!" he ordered. "The Banshee's the flight recorder too. It's showing us what happened before."

The completed TARDIS hovered, spinning in the blank grey sky. In the virtual air above it, a small read-out window spelt out "DRAMATIC DECONSTRUCTI0N" in Middle Gallifreyan.

On the periphery of vision, symbols flickered. "TYPE 40: DIMENSIONAL REGRESSION. OPTIONS AVAILABLE."

The Doctor was only a third of the way down the list of three when the whole menu blocked out in grey.

"OPTIONS WITHDRAWN."

There was a terrible crushing sound.

"Don't look!" warned the Doctor, incapable of doing anything else.

The police-box form of the TARDIS quavered and was suddenly sucked into its own centre point. From around its diminishing outer edges burst a torrent of dimensions, grey and gold, surging and churning across the void. Shapes and angles, ideas and nightmares, yesterday and tomorrow, hurled and colliding together until they formed Now.

Time and Space and thirty-five other dimensions were turned inside out.

The Doctor's companions lay face down on the tower as the tumult raged above them. The Doctor lay flat on his back, eyes glazing at his front-seat view of the incalculable and impossible. His teeth rattled in his head.

The storm settled and slowly coagulated into recognizable shapes. Forms that were too familiar, too endlessly grey.

The dark Banshee was gone. As the Doctor clambered to his feet, the silver cat brushed past him and ran away down the steps of the tower.

Ace and Shonnzi sat up and stared around them. The dead City surrounded them on the inside of its sphere, below and above as before.

"Where is it?" said Ace. "Where's the TARDIS?"

"SARDIT," said the Doctor and sat heavily down on a lump of masonry.

"What?"

"Not TARDIS, SARDIT. Space and Relative..."

". . . Dimensions In Time," she butted in. "I can tell that, Einstein. But where's your ship?"

"It's here," he said and flung his arms out in the same expansive gesture that the spirit had performed. The circuitry sky just overhead, the inner sphere of lifeless grey buildings sunken in the sea of grey mist.

"The City?" said Shonnzi.

"My TARDIS..."

He looked from Ace to Shonnzi. These two people who had been entrusted with the lives of both him and his ship.

But could he trust them? It was not his decision, but over many, many years, aeons, the two concepts, Doctor and TARDIS, had become interdependable and

interexchangeable. They understood each other. At least, the TARDIS understood him, even down to the extent of confiscating his memories when necessary. But it was supposed to work both ways. Now the ship was failing, like part of him withering inside, and the last vestige of its life and hope was bequeathed to them. That final spark had to be kept burning.

"My ship is a cat's cradle of dimensions. Infinitely variable in form. What it looks like depends on who's holding the strings. The Processes, bungling incompetent worms, have turned the whole thing inside out! This City is what remains of my ship. We never left it. And we may never again."

21: Time Revised

In the Beginning, the Process had created the world, dragging it into existence out of the dust.

But now the Process was old and the Past it had once laid out and ruled was snatched away. A new Past grew up across the streams, no longer matching its memories.

Time disrupted. The old creator was usurped, cast out by its younger self.

The young Process, hardly more than an eggling, was not the Process that the older Process remembered being. It was destroying everything already created.

The creature slithered from its Tower, crawling in misery on its finny belly. Across the plain, through the dust and the mud and the thickening mist that were no longer the world it had created. A plan growing in its mind.

It would meet Wilby's challenge. It would be first to find the stolen Future.

The world was all dust. Some fine grained and flowing, some hard packed. It was all alive with energy.

The young Process could change Time in the City, but the older Process could go further. It would seek the Time before the Beginning. It would secure its own birthright and the creation of a new world.

It forced its head into the dust, squirming and burrowing its way deeper into the soft, crumbling ground. Fresh growths were burgeoning in the warm top layer. The Process crushed them as it passed. The dust flowed in behind it and swallowed it up.

The Doctor's ankles began to ache. Clunk, clunk, clunk.

Down the curling stairway inside the broken tower until he felt dizzy. He did not remember it being this far down on the way up.

Worse than walking down an Osirian's spiral spine.

"This is worse than Covent Garden tube when the lifts aren't working," complained Ace.

"Ah, yes," the Doctor said. "I remember. All that cobweb."

Segments of memory were definitely coming back, fascinating and beguiling recollections that seemed almost dreamlike. He could have happily spent months accessing and cross-referencing them. Burying his head in the sand.

Ace was behind him, deliberately moving him on when he slowed down. She was large as life, and about *8.75* times as bossy. But how could he be sure that these memories were not just imagination?

He came to an abrupt halt and she collided with him.

"This isn't a good idea. It's much too soon," he objected.

"No, it's not," she said firmly. "If this place really is the TARDIS, then you're playing on home ground. You'll wipe the floor with the Processes. You're the Doctor again, Professor."

He was doubtful. "Had it occurred to you that my memories were taken away for a good reason?"

Ace stared out of a thin window in the curving stone wall. The fog had closed in, obliterating any detail in the City outside. Reality had shut down for the night.

"Think, Ace. In the wrong fins, knowledge is a very dangerous thing." He sat down on the staircase. Unworn steps, never used in a crumbling tower. "That's why dictators have public book burnings. The library at Alexandria was used to fuel a palace's central heating system."

Ace snapped her fingers in triumph. "Your memories were deliberately hidden. Like when the door handle was taken off the TARDIS console. To protect us."

"To protect the TARDIS. That ship's behaving in a very mercenary way."

"But if the Processes caught you..."

"They feed on information energy... amongst other things. And they've got big and fat on my ship."

Ace kicked at the wall with her boot. "But they're stupid too."

The Doctor scowled and set off down the Stairs again.

"Then they have lousy inwardly digestive systems."

It was a criminal waste. Like presenting the most delicate roulade of Sylvan aguatruffles, served with a piquant chamberry coulis and a garnish of sculpted moon lily fruit, to the biggest and ugliest, primordial Gug-trucker in the Bucket and Trough diner at the notorious Pleiax Space Service Station. *Wot no grease!* Palates like power-shovels.

Taste buds like chainsaws.

"The TARDIS manual was just the hors d'oeuvre," he complained, "and it's useless without the dexterity of the pilot."

"Then you're all right," she said, pounding after him.

"You're no good to them if you can't remember anything."

He stopped abruptly again. "But I can, Ace," he said without looking at her.

"How much?"

His mind was awash with data, thought strands, contributors, subjects. His memory was back with a vengeance. From every idea, a thousand tangents of information streamed off. Fragments of his various lives, friends, enemies, endless travels and startling encounters.

Most of them infuriatingly detailed and irrelevant to the current state of play.

"Bits and pieces," he said. There were ways of clearing his mind - certain techniques he had learned in his youth from a local mystic. At present, they eluded him totally.

"Oh, Professor." She had slipped one arm round him and was hugging him. Resting her chin on his shoulder she said, "Ever get the feeling we've been set up?"

"And now I've challenged the Processes, when I should be steering clear of them."

"But we can beat them, no problem. I've already organized a trap. The other Phazels are setting it up."

"No, Ace. You've done enough already."

"Yeah, well, what is it Pekkary says? We're still a crew."

He smiled, but it was a lie. He wanted his ship back. He could feel it slipping away. Losing power. It was still in shock. It had called on him in desperation. But returning his memory might have been a fatal error.

"Where's Shonnzi?" he said.

"Gone down to help the others. We told you."

The Doctor stood up and took a deep and wearisome breath. "That's the most encouraging thing I've heard all day."

"It is?" she said.

"Definitely. It proves I don't remember everything. Come on."

He set off down the stairs at a fresh pace, leaving Ace behind, apparently confused by the workings of his brain.

"Let's go and see about this trap," he called and heard her feet clattering down behind him.

The fog had thickened into a Dickensian pea-souper. It cloyed the air, diffused with starlight into a dank, opaque wall. The detail of the City was reduced to a series of dark monolithic slabs. Visibility sank to a few metres. The place was heading for total grey-out.

Since the courtyard around the broken tower was empty, Ace reckoned that the Phazels would be working on her trap. She and the Doctor groped their way back along the Street towards the bridge of the attic where she had found him.

"No good digging a pit," she said. "The Process'll just walk up the side."

"Then you'll have to box it in," said the Doctor.

"Just what I figured."

There was no one by the attic ladder, but some work had been going on. A stack of wood and panelling had been gathered, along with several coils of rope. But the street was deserted. Ace's notebook lay in the dust, its pages curling in the damp air.

Ace mounted the steps and looked into the attic.

Nothing in there either. The floating candle flame guttered feebly.

"They can't just have gone," she said. She kept her voice down. The way that the fog pressed in close made her feel that they were being watched.

The Doctor turned over a piece of panelling with his shoe. "What did you have in mind?"

"Lure the Process under the overhang of the attic. Then drop the panels down either side. That way it's trapped."

"The theory's sound, but these boards will never hold the Process on their own. It'll rip them apart like tissue paper."

I suppose you've got a better idea?"

"Plenty of ideas, Ace... none of them relevant."

She touched his arm and nodded up the street. A muffled glow had appeared in the fog. It moved like a corpse light in the haze. Three

dark shapes approached, carrying a single candle between them.

Amnoni, looking distressed, with Shonnzi and Chesperl beside her.

She walked slowly up to the Doctor and said, "Pekkary's been summoned."

The Doctor frowned.

"She means he's gone," said Shonnzi. "It's the start of the final Phase."

Captain Pekkary moved through the fog. The summons drew him like a beacon. It burned even into his blind eye. He was a fatalist. Living in the City only reinforced that.

The girl, Ace, had torn back a curtain in his mind. The rediscovered memory of Gallifrey mocked at them all, only concentrating the isolation of this dead place. No sun, no open skies, no time of their own. His crew, once integrated in mind, were only held together now by a sense of Something worse than the misery they knew.

Their fate stared them in the face at every new bell, eyelets twitching, whips cracking. Their own thoughts buried by the overpowering instinct of a monster. It was a release of sorts: no more thinking. But they would become instruments of torture, designed by the mocking fingers of fate to be their own tormentors in a previous life.

The Menti Celesti were pitiless in their decrees. There were no Gods of Reason. Rassilon had been right. All Gallifreyan civilization was founded on a sham. A dogma created and perpetuated by millennia of priestesses, their arms steeped in Gallifreyan and alien blood. The Gods had hollow hands.

Yet Pekkary saw hope in all the others. Faith in the wide eyes of the girl, Ace, who could summon the past into the present. Faith in Shonnzi, the child Pilot, who had grown into a better leader than he was. The hopes of Chesperl, who carried the child of her dead lover into a world laden with despair.

The damp ground underfoot was strangely soft. He crouched and saw it carpeted by tiny seedlings, pushing up through the cloyed dust.

Time could be changed. The summons could be denied.

For the sake of the others, he determined to fight it.

He faltered as a shadow out of the fog stepped massively into his path. Its angular, armoured body straightened as he approached. Its warbled chittering faded.

His future come to meet him.

They faced each other. Under that cold stare, there was no choice at all. Pekkary came sharply to attention in such a presence.

The Guard Captain's eyelet clusters were immobile. The creature slowly lifted its rust-red helmet off its head.

The older and the oldest Pekkarys embraced in a moment of recognition and understanding. Both trapped in the present, one clasping his future, the other consoling his past.

"Time is changing," said the older Pekkary.

The oldest Pekkary of all nodded.

The inevitable was inescapable. Captain Pekkary, first son of the House of Fordfarding, took the insect-head helmet and lowered it over his own head.

The Guard Captain, now just the oldest Pekkary, was stripped of his rank. Last survivor of the Chronaut crew and the Phazel slaves, he observed the ritual with no betrayal of emotion.

The new Captain of the Processes' guards angled and twisted as a weight surged and buried his mind. His hands shaped like claws. He let out a cry, but it emerged as a harsh twittering of pain.

He rose to strike out and destroy his waiting predecessor. But he was alone on the street, seeing with a multitude of eyes where there had been just one.

He listened to the hateful hissing instructions in his head and understood his orders.

The fog had started to thin in the street below the attic.

The Doctor was moving back and forth, candle in one hand, sweeping his Suyryte rod before him like a metal detector. It resembled a ritualistic dance, Ace decided. Or hoovering by moonlight. Occasionally, he turned in a complete circle before resuming his progress. She had never seen him so fiercely intent.

The Phazels watched, anxiously bemused, from the side of the Street.

"If Pekkary is gone," called Amnoni, "then it cannot be long before we are all summoned."

"I am hurrying!" the Doctor retorted. "You seem to think I'm some sort of cure-all. I can't emerge casting nostrums to all and sundry."

"We're sorry," said Chesperl.

"Bang flash, everything's all right," he went on.

Ace slipped down and joined the Doctor. "They're wound up," she said.

"I thought Gallifreyans were supposed to be telepathic."

"Don't you know? You're a Time Lord too."

His voice sank to an irritated whisper. "They're not Time Lords. Not yet. As far as I'm concerned, they're ancient history."

Ace went into am-dram mode. "The Old Time. The Time of Chaos!" she proclaimed to the back of the stalls.

He shushed her violently. "Once the Time Lords came to power, many things started to decline. It was a messy business."

She grinned. "Better watch *your* anachronisms for a change, Professor."

"Exactly. Even visiting Gallifreyan history is strictly forbidden." He did a swift turn, forcing her to jump the sweeping rod. "We have an appointment to keep, remember?"

"Yeah..." She dodged the rod again. "I don't know what you're doing though. I still think my trap would have worked.

She nodded at the rod. "What is this anyway?"

"Tell you later," he said bluntly.

It's to do with the TARDIS, she thought and went to sit next to Shonnzi.

Vael waited for the new Guard Captain to pass into the mist.

It was moving towards the area where he'd left Shonnzi. His head twitched with desperation. The summoning would come soon. He

needed new allies before they all went under.

There was no movement from the Watch Tower. The younger Process was biding its time. But the older monster...

He felt the ground under him tremble. Then silence.

It was no good confronting the others. He didn't dare show his face.

Only one of them had a mind open enough to hear him.

But he had to make the most of his resources, even if it did mean talking to the brat.

Vael concentrated his thoughts. They pooled into one cry for attention.

" *Shonnzi!* "

For a moment, Shonnzi didn't seem to notice Ace.

Then he looked up, startled. He smiled quickly and said,

"Always use the available resources, that's what he used to tell me."

"That was the dreams, was it?" she said and watched the Doctor's sweeping dance. His shadow, thrown up by the candle, loomed into the mist until it seemed to fill the night.

"So he's trying for the one resource we all missed.

That's what I told him to look for. The daft old goik still doesn't remember everything."

She looked sternly at Shonnzi. "You're not supposed to know about all that."

He lowered his voice. "Oh, I don't," he said. "TARDISes and Time Lords, miss? No, never heard of them."

Ace grinned. "No. Me neither." She wanted to relax, but her neck and shoulders were knotted tight with perpetual stress.

Shonnzi grimaced and put on an appalling Scottish accent. "Haven't hearrrd of this Doctorr either. Who did you say he was? I'd like a little chat..."

Ace only half stifled a guffaw.

"I'm not deaf," said a voice across the street.

"Try further to your left," Shonnzi called.

Ace leant across and squeezed his hand. When she looked into his face, he was frowning. "So you're filling in the missing details?" she said.

He glanced up and down the street nervously. "He'd better hurry," he said quietly, his tone suddenly chilled.

"What did he teach you in the dreams?" she said. "And what's all this summoning business?"

Shonnzi's smile returned. It looked forced. "Nothing." He leaned in close to her. "Is he really from the future? Go on, you can tell me."

"Just don't ask," Ace muttered. After a pause when he was too quiet, she said, "What's the matter?"

"I'm all right." He shook his head and looked directly into her eyes. "Look after him, Ace."

"Why? You're not going away.

"I never thanked you, did I?"

"What for?"

"Ages ago. When I was a kid and you saved my life."

"Cut the sick jokes, Shonnzi. It isn't fair."

He smiled that forced smile again. There were tears behind its mask. "Bit of a wasted effort really."

He turned his head quickly as if he heard something.

There was a definite trembling in the ground. He touched his fingers to the dust and stared along the street.

"Got you!" shouted the Doctor. "We were right, Shonnzi!"

His Suyryte rod was juddering wildly over a section of ground. He began to scrabble in the dust with his bare hands. In a moment he had

unearthed a cable.

"We were right. I knew the old facilities must still exist under all this dross," he declared excitedly. He started to drag up the cable, following its course across the width of the street.

"Doctor!"

Ace was gawping at a massive furrow that was ploughing along the street towards them.

"Get back, all of you!" shouted the Doctor. He gave one final yank at the cable. The length that emerged was grafted with a small metallic node bud. To Ace's horror, he turned his back and sat down on the shaking ground. He started to needle the Suyryte rod into the junction, jiggling it like a lever.

Nothing happened.

Behind him, the furrow surged closer, a land-bound torpedo homing on its target.

Ace tried to run at the Doctor, but strong arms pulled her back. She kicked and turned to find herself struggling with Amnoni.

Shonnzi had gone.

"Doctor!" she yelled. "Get out of the way!"

He ground the rod steadily into the node. "What use is a chimper junction if I can't get a response?" he ranted.

"Where's Shonnzi? This was his idea."

Behind him, the ground broke open. The Doctor was pitched forward as the Process burst upwards in a shower of dust and earth. It loomed over him, bellowing hungrily.

The node snatched the rod from his grasp, absurdly swallowing whole something four times its length.

The Doctor squirmed over on to his back and stared up into the open maw of the Process.

"It's no good eating me," he cried. "I don't remember a thing!"

The slavering circle of teeth angled out to tear at him.

Ace kicked hard and wrenched herself free of Amnoni.

She grabbed up one of the discarded umbrellas and ran at the rampant monster.

The tip slid on the slimy hide, causing no more than a graze, but the brute was distracted for a moment.

The Doctor rolled away, winding himself in the cable. He shook the node bud angrily. "What do I do to make you work?" he shouted.

The node opened like a foil flower in his hand. At its heart lay an egg-shaped ruby grafted into a nest of light filaments.

"Voice access," approved the Doctor, ignoring the rumpus behind him.

Ace was battering at the Process with the ragged umbrella. It spat angrily back at her, moving faster than she expected. With one swing of its massive head, it sent her tumbling into a stunned heap across the street.

The creature turned back towards the Doctor and was met by a barrage of stones and wood thrown by Chesperl and Amnoni. It roared its fury.

The Doctor held the chimper flower like a microphone and keyed in vocal instructions. "Pilot ident," he barked.

"Access me Architectural Configuration."

There was no window or menu to select from. He was working blind. The flower gave a little fizz and the ruby changed to amber.

"Doctor!" yelled Chesperl.

He turned and saw the Process advancing upon him, oblivious of the continuing barrage. He began to retreat under the lip of the attic.

"Localized configuration only," he instructed the flower.

"Phrontisterie section. Delete floor and lower structure to ground level. Then reinstate solid floor and keep."

The Process bellowed as it cartwheeled in.

The Doctor dodged round the side of the ladder. There was no response to his command. The crystal stayed amber.

The command was correct. Why didn't it work? What had he forgotten now? "Where's Shonnzi when I need him?"

A wave of warm stench came over him. The monster loomed up. He tripped, his foot tangled in the cable. The shock brought sudden inspiration.

"Send, you idiot! Enter!" he shouted.

The stars above the street flickered and dimmed noticeably as the amber turned emerald with acceptance.

The attic floor overhead blittered out of existence. The ladder clattered down, striking the Process across its serpentine body.

The room revealed above tapered up with bare rafters.

A massive grinding. The whole structure was sliding down between the side walls of the street.

It came down fast. The Process lunged wildly as the Doctor flung himself at the closing gap. He rolled under the descending wall with only inches to spare.

The room reached the ground with a heavy crash.

Ace was beside him with Chesperl and Amnoni in two seconds flat. "Geronimo, Professor! Cosmic stuff!"

"Is that well done in the King's English?" he said with an exhausted half smile.

" *Well* well done!" A bruise was already flaring blue across her cheek.

He reached out for the cable. It ran directly under the attic wall. The chimper flower was trapped beneath the Process's new cage.

There was the first of a series of crashes from inside.

The Process was plainly hurling itself against the wall. They heard its muffled cries.

"That won't hold for long," muttered the Doctor. He looked up at Chesperl and Amnoni. They bowed their heads and turned away.

"Where's Shonnzi gone?" the Doctor said. "He knows this place inside out. I need his advice."

"Christ," said Ace. "I forgot."

22: The Frying Pan Option

Shonnzi.

There was a frightened thrill at the contact. So long since Vael had communicated like this. Easier than he imagined, putting junk thoughts into another head. Like the stallsmen in the markets on Gallifrey.

Why should he care? What Future did he have? So make it a game. One last game. It'll move the brat faster.

" *Behind you, Shonnzi*."

He could feel a reaction in the brat's head. He caught glimpses through the brat's eyes. Moving along the grey-green alleys towards the Dial Square. Always glancing behind. Coming this way. The little sheetsnacker's mind was churning. He thought the worst. Thought it was a summoning.

So it was... of sorts.

" *It's getting closer. It'll catch you. Get away, Shonnzi!* "

He backed the thoughts with a slug of fear.

A thought slammed defiantly back. No words. Just hatred.

It startled Vael. Little brat, he thought, you know. You know I'm in your head.

He sent: " *Come on then. Come and find me. You can't do without me, Shonnzi. The Process is coming for you*."

He began to laugh at the anger that was hurled back into his thoughts. The glimpses came faster. The brat was running now. And the streets were definitely turning green.

" *Find me, Shonnzi. I'm waiting*."

The brat was almost there. One more turning would do it.

" *Nearly got you!* "

Something hit Vael between the eyes. A blow from the inside of his skull. He stumbled and grabbed at a doorway for support.

A glimpse of swirling red eyelets and a hand over Shonnzi's face.

His head wanted to scream Shonnzi's scream.

Then nothing. No sight, no sound.

" *Little brat, where are you?* "

A sickening empty darkness in his head.

It stunned him. He crawled slowly to the corner on his knees, hardly daring to look. The ground was soft and cool with fresh growth.

A shape lay in the film of green seedlings that covered the next street. Over it crouched the Guard Captain. The creature was forcing an insect-helmet over Shonnzi's head.

Vael flattened himself against the wall, unable to move.

But what did it matter now? There was no escape.

Nowhere to go. The Future was coming.

" *It'll get you!* "

He put back his head and let fly a scream of thought pain. Who cared who heard? A yell of defiance against their tormentor, cutting across the City's seasons of past and possible.

" *Is that you, Vael?* " said a new voice in his head. A new intruder. He choked with fright.

" *Yes, I thought so*," the Doctor continued. " *I should keep your thoughts to yourself if I were you. Come and find me if you want to talk about it. But hurry. From the look of this place, we don't have long*."

"It's not going to hold, Professor!"

The Doctor totted irritably as Ace wrenched at his arm.

Behind him, the attic wall shuddered under the Process's relentless attack. Fragments of grey cladding were starting to fall away revealing

the rafters underneath.

"He always leaves things to the last minute," she complained to the waiting Phazels, and desperation was starting to show in her voice. The two women had said nothing since Shonnzi had gone. No one had. But they all thought the worst. Chesperl watched the attic wall, Amnoni stared along the street, both waiting to see which impending disaster would engulf them first.

The Doctor had been holding the plumbline up against the tilt of the City. "Worrying," he said as he wound up the string.

He took off his shoe and prised open the heel. There was a compass inside, marked with various astronomical gradings and directional symbols. The needle was turning slowly like the second-hand on a clock, unable to settle on one reading. He tapped it irritably and it finally stopped. A small blue readout announced "SPRING TIDE".

"Impossible," he said, showing the instrument to Ace. "Who ever heard of a tide without a moon?"

He scrutinized the sky just in case.

A crack splintered down the attic wall. It was ready to burst open.

"It's getting out!" yelled Ace and threw her weight against the heaving surface. To her apparent surprise, Amnoni and Chesperl joined her.

The Doctor put on his shoe. There were things to worry about. His rediscovered memories and their implications were almost swamping his practical activities. In the City, the Laws of Time were being broken on a thorough and systematic basis. Time-lines were being crossed and people were meeting themselves. The resultant explosive catastrophe, Blinivictual's theory made flesh, was somehow being contained by the TARDIS. Somehow his ship was holding together under an overwhelming assault, but where was it drawing power from?

Shonnzi would have known. Shonnzi had been

augmented with the ship's failing knowledge. Now he was gone and the Doctor hardly knew where to start.

"Doctor! Do something!"

He caught Ace's glare of desperation from the wall. He frowned, took

off his shoe again and emptied out a couple of stones. The imprisoned Process was howling with rage.

No Time Lord was allowed to encounter the past of his world. Yet he was here, talking to Gallifreyans from an almost prehistoric time, before any of the world he knew existed. He was in severe danger of influencing their future and the planet's development. Another Law of Time to break. Most fascinatingly of all, Chesperl was carrying a child, but no child had been born on Gallifrey since that terrible moment when Rassilon came to power.

There was a fuzz of green on the streets where new shoots, burgeoned by the rain storm, where forcing their way up. All around, the grey City world glowered down at him.

Many of its buildings, ridiculous parodies, were reminiscent of the ancient pre-Rassilite architecture shown in books of Gallifreyan archaeology. The cities of the Old Time must have been vaguely like this.

"Ha," he exclaimed as the truth hit like a lightning bolt.

The new form that his ship had taken depended on the power that sustained it. The City was constructed on the confused memories of the Gallifreyan crew. Their mental artron energy hijacked by the invading Process. That was how the leech got its power. The more Phazels the monster subjugated or absorbed, the stronger it became. He wondered if it knew that.

Another crash and a scream from Chesperl. The Process was forcing its way out of its prison. The last minute that the Doctor always left things until was already up.

The younger Process spat Shonnzi Phazel's scream of anguish out of its mind like chewed bones. It pulverized his thoughts with its own. Their content was irrelevant. It was still hungry. A bloated presence in the safety of its Watch Tower, already gorged on thoughts and flesh, it was fed images from its new guards.

Through the insect-eyed helmets, it looked into the arteries and streets of its World City. Two near-identical images in its mind converging with two more. At the entrance to the Dial Square on the Middle Phase, the other recruits waited. The recruits held in the Tower, awaiting the Guard Captain and the Shonnzi guard.

" *Once a crew, always a crew*."

Occasional memories surfaced from the guards' crushed minds. But the *crew* was how they were bound. The summons was inescapable.

Two more Phazels to recruit.

And when they were all summoned, there were more guards to recruit on the first Phase. All Now would be the same from the Beginning. All alternatives would be levelled.

There would be no Future to be stolen.

The older Process's huge head squirmed through the gap in the wall, forcing back the women's attempts to close the opening. Its lamprey teeth flexed with its effort.

The Doctor advanced on the emerging creature. "So you've decided to show yourself then," he called. "It's a long time since our first talk was interrupted."

The Process stopped moving for a second. "Stolen Future. Where is it?"

"None of your business!"

The bloated parasite snarled and renewed its struggle, almost catching Ace off her guard. "Keep pushing," she yelled to the Phazels.

The Doctor was alarmed to see both women turn their heads in unison and look past him down the street.

"I said, push!" Ace yelled again as their resistance faltered. The gap pushed wider.

Four guards stood at the far end of the artery. Helmets chittering, eyelets writhing. One wore Captain Pekkary's maroon jacket, the second, Pilot Shonnzi's red tunic. The third was dressed in black. Tattered silver overalls hung on the near skeletal body of the fourth.

Amnoni's face drained of any awareness. The Doctor slammed himself against the wall as she slid from her place.

"Amnoni! Don't listen to it! Don't answer!" He pushed against the Process's weight, unable to reach the woman as she was drawn away to answer the recruiting summons of her Captain.

Ace was blinking with tears of anger and determination.

She yelled a protest as Chesperl swayed back from her position.

"Chesperl!" The Doctor's voice came like a sharp military command. "Your future isn't there. Don't listen. You carry the future with you!"

There was no response.

"Remember Reogus! Remember your baby!"

Chesperl's hand linked with Amnoni's. They walked on together towards the waiting guards. The Doctor and Ace were trapped, hands and shoulders scraped by the wall, muscles aching, powerless to save the two women from a reunion with their crew and their fate.

The guards enfolded them and led them from the street.

The Process had also watched the summons. It spat angrily and began to force forward with fresh vigour. The whole wall was splitting open, pushing the Doctor and Ace further and further back. They could no longer hold the monster alone.

With a crash, another figure hurled itself at the wall. Vael had appeared between them. He was striking repeatedly at the Process's head with an umbrella, using it like a goad.

The monster shrieked as black blood spurted from one of its eyes. It started to withdraw inside the attic. As the pressure eased, the Doctor and Ace were able to force the split in the wall back together.

"Seal it up," demanded Vael. "Don't let it out again!"

Inside the attic, the Process was groaning balefully.

Ace looked at Vael with contempt. "What do you want?"

"You took your time," said the Doctor. "Is it a change of hearts, or has a fair-weather friendship taken a turn for the worse?"

Vael leant on the wall with both arms and gasped his breath back.

"He's been kicked out," said Ace. "He's out on his ear because he didn't make the complete bastard stakes."

"I don't apologize for my friend," said the Doctor, "she's had a fraught time lately. Much of it due to you." He crouched and smoothed his hand over the fractures in the wall. As he suspected, they were slowly healing.

"Let's get out of here," said Ace. "We've got to get Shonnzi and the

others back."

Vael looked up. His eyes were red from weeping.

"Impossible," he said.

"Only if you know it's impossible," the Doctor declared.

"So be quiet."

"The Phazels are gone," Vael insisted. "The younger Process wanted new guards."

"Why? Can't it manage without you?" sneered Ace.

"It's driven out the older Process. It thinks it's creating a new world. Starting again. It still has slaves on the first Phase of the City."

Ace's eyes blazed. "But it'll be using the older Phazels to control their younger selves. The same people. What about Shonnzi? And Chesperl with the baby?"

"How many Phases of the City are there?" said the Doctor.

"Three," she said, but she looked sick.

"Young, older and eldest. I think you'll find it's always been the same here, Ace. Always oppression and slavery in a horrible paradox."

Ace released an expletive that she had only known on Earth. "What happened to the oldest ones?"

The Doctor concentrated and threw a grim thought out to Vael. " *You can tell me, Vael, but my friend is very young*."

Vael nodded slightly. "Retired," he said aloud. He thought, " *It ate them*."

The Doctor closed his eyes. "Of course." " *And your future self?* "

"There's no future..."

"Wilby!" The Process's iced iron voice came from a still healing gap in the wall.

"I'm here," called the Doctor.

"The Future, it was stolen by you."

"If you say so."

"Now it is crushed."

"The Doctor's ship was stolen," shouted Ace.

The Doctor shushed her into silence. "There's a Gallifreyan present," he muttered with a sidelong glance at Vael. "Keep the anachronisms down."

"You're a walking anachronism yourself," she said.

"The Younger Process, it changes the City. Now changes to a new Now."

The Doctor put his head to the slowly closing gap. He felt an embarrassingly pleasurable glow of cruelty smoulder in his twin hearts. "Looks like curtains for you too then, doesn't it?" he said. He had devoted his lives to solving other people's problems, surely he was allowed to take this attack, of all attacks, personally?

The older Process snarled in its prison. "The world, it will all be renewed! All be changed. The Beginning, it will be rebegun. A new Creation. A new Future!"

"'How easily pleased are the foolish'," quoted the Doctor.

"Pelatov. Folio three, canto sixteen, verse eighty-one."

There was a roar from inside the attic. The monster began to hurl itself against the wall again. The structure shuddered but held.

"Yeah," said Ace. "Well chuffed."

The Doctor tutted and looked at the sky. As he had feared, the stars were appreciably dimmer. Something had been set in motion. Some infernal new scheme was drawing off any residual power left in his ship. It could not endure much longer.

"Miserable creature! What have you done now?" he shouted in anger, but his voice was drowned by the commotion from inside.

"Doctor, we should get away from here," urged Vael.

Ace was tugging at the cable trapped under the wall.

"This thing controls the TARDIS decorating, right? So if I dig it out, can you call up the lab?"

"No, Ace," the Doctor said sharply. "No explosions inside my TARDIS."

"It's only nitro," she protested. "Not enriched uranium."

" *Only* nitro?" he said severely. "Nitro-nine-a? Xyz?"

"Doctor." Vael nodded along the street.

The six new guards were slowly advancing towards them. In the other direction, the Process was beginning to reopen the fracture in the attic wall.

"So much for the chat," muttered the Doctor. "Which do you prefer, Ace? The frying pan or the fire?"

"Are you still *Wilby?* " she said angrily.

"It's getting dark. That wall won't last much longer."

"Or are you really the Doctor now?"

He glanced at the stars again. At the zenith, the sodium giant guttered like a candle in a draught. Something was happening. He could feel the whole place closing in, fraction by fraction. "Not yet, Ace. Not even *Will be the Doctor*. Not until I have my ship back."

It was tightening around him. He had seen the buildings shifting against the string of his plumbline. Guards were closing in. A monster was breaking free. All in his TARDIS.

In his head.

"Just now, I've a nasty feeling I may not even be a *Maybe*."

She glanced at the guards. "OK, so we make a fight of it. What I need, Professor, is..."

"Wait." It was no good holding out any longer. His memory had reminded him of a couple of items, particularly nasty concoctions, he had found some time ago in the TARDIS laboratory when he was repairing the toaster. He had confiscated them when she wasn't looking. Two small test tubes that were clinking in his voluminous trouser pocket even now. A miracle they were not smashed. He fished them out and passed them to her. "Here, I found these."

"I know," she said. "They should be well stewed by now."

"Just one," he said and pointed towards the shuddering wall. "A diversion."

"What?"

"Let it out." The guards were getting too close to argue.

"You're joking."

"Do it, Ace!"

"But that's Shonnzi and the Phazels!"

"No, it isn't," snapped Vael. "They're only on the first Phase now.

"But they..."

The Doctor snatched back one of the test tubes.

"Gardyloo!" he shouted. In one extraordinary movement, enough to make Nijinsky jealous, he gathered Ace under one arm, flung the test tube directly at the base of the wall with the other and executed a neat *jeté* clear of the blast.

The landing was less than dignified. The explosion ripped out the wall, barrelling them into a heap among the lush growth of new plants.

"I didn't see!" objected Ace.

"Good," said the Doctor. He smiled to himself. "And that State of Grace circuit still needs looking at."

The roar of the explosion echoed up around the City.

The guards were falling back as the Process came wriggling out of the smoke.

"Don't move!" whispered Vael. He was crouching beside the Doctor. "It has lousy eyesight."

The leech was crawling on its fins, searching with one foothead, while the other, streaked black with blood, trailed behind it. Attracted by the movement and chittering, it moved hissing in rage towards the guards.

The Doctor watched his enemy go. Three Phases of the City, but only two Processes. What did that mean? Young, older or eldest? Space in his ship was crushing inwards around him and Time was being snatched away, driving him ever further back to the Beginning. Or to the new Beginning where everything he knew might end.

" *In here. Quickly!* " urged Vael.

The Doctor found himself shuffled through a hidden door in the street walls. Only later did he realize that the voice had been in his head and that Ace had not heard.

There was a darkness in Vael, a lurking energy that came through clearest when he smiled. And he was smiling now.

Ace watched beside the Doctor as the crippled leech scattered the guards before it. She saw the figure that had been Shonnzi stumbling away from the monster. She wanted to drag him clear, and tear off the filthy helmet that had smothered him. He was rude and funny and made her angry when he wasn't there. And under it all, he really cared.

And she hadn't stopped thinking about him since he'd first collided with her. She didn't believe he was gone.

And if the Doctor had to save his TARDIS, then she had to save the other Phazels. The grumblies. Because they loved Shonnzi and he loved them back.

A tiny figure stood at the end of the street watching as the guards fled. He stepped forward uselessly as the Shonnzi guard staggered past him. He was ignored. The ginger-haired kid was left, petrified with fear in the monster's path.

Going back to the past was going the wrong way to save Shonnzi. She turned to the Doctor and saw Vael smile as he slammed the door in the wall behind them.

23: The Pythia's Curse

She watched them as they came and went. Some of them she knew, others were strange. They barely interested her.

Today it was Lord Dowtroyal from the Court of Principals. He brought

petitions from across the Empire. There were calls for military aid which needed her seal. Demands for independence from the Aubert Cluster.

The Council would find ways around this. They would sustain her. She was sacred and her cook and her latest taster were trustworthy. As long as she endured, she was still the figurehead. They said that civil unrest was mounting against her. The people would not do that. She was their Pythia, their guardian.

The Admiralty was in a dudgeon over restrictions placed on the space fleets. The Hero Prydonius had publicly denounced the Pythia in Council, pledging his allegiance to the Rassilon clique. Prydonius had always sulked like a spoiled brat, but he was popular and therefore dangerous politically. In an unprecedented gesture of esteem, the Council of Principals created him a hereditary noble and packed him off to Funderell on the asteroid archipelago.

Conveniently far out. She approved of that. He was to act as an independent observer in some minor territorial dispute between Ruta III and the Sontara Warburg.

If she had still had her powers of course, she would have foreseen the situation and headed it off long before. In the circumstances, the Council were handling events better than she had imagined.

Rassilon had been held under house arrest, accused of misappropriation of Academia revenues. The charges were trumped up of course, but the investigation forestalled his plans for a while. They would never hold. The little man's political record was impeccable. But she knew he was not to be trusted. He had stolen her steel comb.

"Excellency, we must have your decision."

The tedious Lord Dowtroyal was droning at her from just below her basket. His cowl was pushed disrespectfully back so that she could see his pudgy, grey face. Beside him, muttering in his ear, was her personal physician. They stared at her as if she were a curio in the Academia Library.

"Highness, you must name a successor. The constitution is adamant on this point."

So that was their scheme. Once they had a successor they could be rid of her. She had chosen long ago, but there was an impediment. That

was why they waited.

Dowtroyal and the physician looked as if they would never leave. They irritated her.

"Her name, Highness. One name. One word, then. For the security of the future."

He was clutching the reliquary of accession, defiling with his man's hands the epiphany scrolls of Soneuramos.

Ancient sacraments entrusted to the two hundred and seventeenth Pythia in the sacred firelake of Rag-Finish.

What did she care? Next they would bring out the invisible armour of Troppolsabler, or the holy icons of the Bright Past.

Finally the Great Book of Future Legends itself. She spat, picked up her bowl of fish tongues and flung it at him.

After that, they left her alone for the day. No more despatches to ignore, or strangers who stared. They were all ushered out of the Cavern and Handstrong barred the door.

She picked at the weavework of her basket and counted the talismans on her robe, waiting for the evening devotions to begin in the Temple above. Living from moment to moment, each one an achievement, where once she had seen all that would be and marked Time as it passed.

At the stroke of the crepuscular gong, she heard a side gate to the Cavern sing on its hinges. A figure emerged from the shadows. One of her older vot'resses, wearing muddy sandals and wrapped in the fur robe of a market trader.

From her sleeve she drew out a small casket.

" *As you commanded, venerable one*."

" *Let me see it.*"

Handstrong came from his cell, carrying a pole fixed with brass fingers. The digits grasped the casket as the Grelladian raised the contraption up towards the Pythia.

A rough box with a worn leviahide binding, profane that so precious an item should be smuggled out in such a package. Yet she could feel

its power before she even raised the lid.

The eye stared up at her from a cushion of red silk. A globe of mottled amber streaked with a single black slit. The eye of the Sphinx. She was sure that the pupil contracted as it was exposed to the light. She lifted it up gently and it weighed heavily in her hand.

" *How much?* " she thought.

" *Twenty thousand treazants, Highness*."

" *What does one expect from common thieves and cutpurses?* "

" *It will be missed from the Library*."

" *The Council Police contingent has always been a prime beneficiary of the Temple Welfare Trust. I have been their Matron for many years*.

She cupped the glistening eye in her hands, feeling its peculiar energy diffusing through her brittle bones and dry sinews. "Begone," she said aloud.

The vot'ress bowed and left the Cavern. Handstrong remained, awaiting orders.

"I said, begone!" she cried.

She must be alone at this moment. The torchlight painted the Cavern of Prophecy with gold and black shadow.

Water oozed on the sooty rock walls. The age-old legacy of Time gathered in this place like dripped tallow from a candle.

It had been the hub of the Empire since the beginning and she was the core. The guardian and embodiment of that heritage. The unsullied symbol of the world's fertility.

She was Gallifrey.

Without her, the world and its Empire would slowly die an ageless living death.

That was her curse, and she laid it on Rassilon and all his followers.

Even as her guard slipped away, she opened her hands and looked into the depths of the Sphinx's eye.

At the Gate of the Future, the light was hazy. The wheeling birds cried hungrily overhead. She stepped forward and pressed against the bronze doors.

They would not yield. Mocking faces looked out from the grilles.

As she reached for the doors again, one moved of its own accord. A blade of the darkness beyond slowly widened as the door ground its way open. A cowled figure with a flaming torch stood in the archway.

"Who do you seek?" he said.

There had never been a gatekeeper before.

"I seek my successor," she declared. "He must be found."

"Come through," he said. "If you dare..."

He stood back to let her pass, but she faltered. A cold wind was blowing into her face from the Future.

The Doctor or the kid? There was no choice. No time to think. Ace nearly gave up on them both.

Across the street, the Process was slithering towards the child. He had edged backwards until he had pinned himself to a wall, transfixed like a frightened rabbit in the eye of an advancing snake.

She snatched up an umbrella and ran at the leech. She kept yelling at the kid to get clear, but he was too terrified to move. Holding the umbrella like a two-handed broadsword, she beat at the monster's rippling flanks.

The Process ignored the attack, intent on catching at least one victim. It reared over the kid, spluttering triumphantly.

Ace pulled out the second test tube of her new nitro-ten.

"Get clear!" she yelled at him. "Shonnzi! Get down!"

The kid's own name brought him out of it. He ducked low and darted clear along the street. The Process lunged after him.

Ace flung the nitro.

The Process took the full force of the blast. It screamed.

A spray of grit and black blood hit Ace across the face.

When the smoke and dust cleared, the creature lay in a twisted mound at the edge of the bomb crater.

Ace wanted to yell, "Ace, dragon-slayer!", but the excitement came in cold fizzes and she felt sickened. She was blooded.

The kid was standing a couple of yards away. Ace reached out and hugged him tightly. She rocked him for a moment and kissed his head. Her tears were soaking them both. She wiped her face with her sleeve and he eased gently away from her. He pulled a biscuit out of his pocket and planted it into her hand. Then he ran, vanishing into the deepening gloom.

The stars were clustered closer, as if the sky was shrinking. Their fading light had become thin and brittle.

Ace ached with weariness all over. And she was on her own again.

"I never thanked you, did I?" Shonnzi had said. "When I was a kid and you saved my life."

The kid had nowhere to run to. His future was already walking round as a beetle-head. Time was tangled, but she was going to cut through the knot. She needed Shonnzi back. She stopped herself just in time. She was almost going to say Death is no obstacle.

She had to find the Doctor too, but she was so exhausted. It was easier to sit and do nothing. The Doctor always muddled through. He made an art form out of it.

She eyed the lifeless body of the Process. It took up half the street where it lay. Its fins still twitched occasionally with final reflex actions.

Supposing the Doctor was still two biscuits short of a tin

—not the Doctor yet at all. He'd never go off willingly with Vael. Vael was grinning. It had been a trick. Sooner or later, the Doctor's genius was going to run out, taking his luck with it.

Shonnzi — not her — had been entrusted with all the TARDIS's information. And now he'd gone too. Better if he'd been killed outright.

Something glinted in the shadows across the street. A clump of the squat plants that were coming up everywhere had produced a cluster of flowers. They shimmered like little diamond glow-worms.

A tiny alcove was moulded into the wall nearby. Ace found a sharp stone and scratched the word SHONZY on the fascia above the alcove. She broke the kid's biscuit and laid half of it inside. Then she picked a few of the glowing flowers and put them with the rest of her offering. Just a little act of faith. The next best thing to a funeral pyre. She'd always been the same over friends.

Next, it was find the Doctor.

She sat against the wall while she ate the rest of the biscuit. It tasted of honey and cream, flavoured with lemon.

The air was warm and the City creaked as it rocked her to sleep. Asleep on an open street near the twitching hulk of the monster.

Vael kept his hand firmly on the Doctor's arm. The guard outside had halted right by the entrance to the broken tower.

It had stopped chittering as it hunted, alert to the slightest sound in the empty arteries. Worse, Vael knew that it was the guard he was destined to become.

If memories of the new Now supplanted those already in the guard's head, then they were in real danger. If its mind existed inside the helmet at all, it would never forget where it had caught its younger self.

They had headed for the mercury stream and the First Phase of the City. Vael kept insisting that Ace had been right behind them when they started. She would make for the First Phase too and they would meet her there.

" *Vael is all right. He"11 help you. Lucky you found him*."

He slipped pockets of assurance into the Doctor's thoughts. Easy enough to do, since the strange man's mind was teeming with layer upon layer of information, more than any brain could logically deal with. Most of it disordered and incomprehensible.

When they had seen the guard on the street ahead, they had ducked into the tower and crouched in its shadows.

The tower was creaking gently. Vael had heard the sound from other buildings they had passed. As if the City was stirring from a long sleep. Or in its slow death throes.

A new silvery light was filtering in from the street. The guard's footstep swished closer in the covering of plants.

Vael's hand squeezed the Doctor's arm tighter. He was not going to lose his ticket of passage out of this dying prison world. He listened to the thoughts tumbling in the Doctor's head, apparently oblivious of the danger. One name suddenly surfaced that startled Vael. A name he had completely forgotten.

Rassilon.

The black shape of the guard filled the doorway.

A loud crash of falling masonry from somewhere nearby.

The tower trembled. The guard chittered and vanished along the street.

The Doctor's thoughts still babbled into Vael's head, registering no reaction to their salvation at all. He squeezed the Doctor's arm spitefully. It was rough and hard in his grasp. He was somehow

holding a narrow stone column instead. The Doctor had vanished, although his chaotic mind was still loud enough.

The spiral stair was the only way he could have gone.

Vael put out a junk thought, a tracker. " *Remember Rassilon.*"

" *Rassilon?* " said another voice.

Vael choked. A thrill of cold terror ran through his body.

An ever-present eye, long denied, was opening in his mind.

An eye like a cat's.

" *So I find you skulking here at last*," she said. " *Vael, my pupil. What is this place? Who knows of Rassilon here? Tell me!* "

The Doctor tried to rail in his wandering thoughts, but the strangest notions kept popping into his head. It made him feel extremely uncomfortable. He needed Shonnzi and Ace, although Vael, whom he did not trust, at least clarified a few matters.

From a window near the top of the tower, he saw the stars slowly glimmering out one by one. The enclosed sky was going dark. Above and below on the curving surface of his ship, the streets were traced out as glowing lines in the darkness. *Madevinia aridosa* in flower. An iridescent desert flower that bloomed profusely after infrequent rain storms, turning the Gallifreyan wastelands into starfields. Because of its brief and frantic life span, it was regularly used in scientific experiments and early space missions.

He tried to concentrate. The whole environment was contracting, which accounted for the fresh tremors. Either this was the start of the Process's new Beginning, or his ship was dying. The TARDIS's inner dimensions were slowly compacting. The buildings in the City would soon be grinding themselves into each other. Eventually it would crush them all.

No sign of the cat or the Banshee. The infinitely variable safeguards that Rassilon had installed in every TARDIS from the Type 1 were collapsing as well. The survival of the Doctor's ship rested solely with the Doctor — if the Doctor was ever restored again.

The glowing criss-cross of the streets below and the dimensional strings of the cat's cradle. The Ancient Gallifreyans had excelled in

entrelacement. Motives interwoven under and above, back and forth, until the start of the design was lost. Patterns and threads, ornate stone ridges on the great Houses, intricate lines of coloured plants and soil in the knot gardens, polyphonic voices in the thought pool, repeated steps in the lordly dances. A net in which they were all entangled.

The strings stretched across all Time like a web. He had seen it reflected everywhere from the rich patterns of the redoubtable Miss David's carpet shop in Antalya to the ration queues of Boom City after the Great Soul Rush of "831 had failed. The universe was all enmeshed.

Yet out of that chaotic fantasia of form, Rassilon had translated the TARDISes and fashioned the Matrix.

Rassilon again. Remember Rassilon. The most celebrated of Gallifrey's Heroes, who led his world out of the Dark Time the Time of Chaos. The architect of the modern world, whose father was a suet shredder.

But that was the stuff of legend, millennia before the age into which the Doctor was born. One of forty-five cousins from the loom of the gloomy House of Lungbarrow in the southern mountains. One of the accursed children of Rassilon.

And Rassilon decreed that no Time Lord shall travel into Gallifrey's past. One of the laws of Time.

The Doctor had met him once, but that was in his tomb, long after he had died. The past was always with the Time Lords, locked in their age-old, stultified constitution, remembered in fragmentary race memory. Sometimes it came too close.

The Doctor had also met Omega, another legendary Hero. Poor Omega, whose vainglorious sacrifice had created the Time Lords and marked the point where Rassilon's Intuitive Revelation all started to go wrong. The start of the slow decline of Gallifrey. But these figures were both relics — no longer compatible in the modern universe.

It was a chance encounter with the Book of the Old Time that had first nudged the Doctor's own thoughts back towards his world's archae-barbaric past. A suspicion had been born in his mind that before regeneration there had been reincarnation. Some memories might be more than racial inheritance. Nothing lasts that does not change.

But the answer was beyond reach. To visit Gallifrey's past was the one

rule he had never broken. Until now, when the opportunity presented itself before temptation had even set in.

One word out of place to these Gallifreyans with whom he was trapped, one anachronistic slip and the whole of that past and civilization might be smashed. And he, the Doctor, might cease to exist, just as Reogus's own future self had been wiped away.

He must resist.

The tower shivered. Vael was standing beside him.

"Tell me about it," said the young man. He had a feverish look about him.

"This is no place to talk," replied the Doctor and prepared to descend.

The tower lurched. He stumbled to one side and found the narrow stairway blocked.

"Where are you going?"

"Let me through, Vael. The whole area's becoming dimensionally unstable."

He found his arm gripped again. Vael's hand was like a vice.

"Let go, Vael Voryunsti."

"You're going to help me get out of this place, Doctor."

"Impossible! No one can get out!"

"You can. You're the only one with a ship!"

Another tremor ran up the tower. The Doctor glanced down from the window. "I've no ship. It's all dying!" There were guards grouping on the glowing street below.

"Wilby!" croaked the Captain. "Escape, there is none!

Come down!"

A crack ran up the walls. Vael's grip tightened.

The Doctor ignored it. He squinted out through the darkening sky. The glimmering lines of the streets clearly showed up the inner curve of

the world sphere. To the South above them, there was a definite bulge in the cityscape. The ground was heaving upwards like the flank of a volcano when an eruption is imminent.

"No parley!" shouted the Doctor.

"Then the tower, it will bring you down." The Captain turned and its guards clustered around it.

"What do they mean?" said Vael.

The Doctor stepped angrily back from the window. He hated days like this. "Don't you know?" he said. He disliked the young man's cold stare. A Coppellian strabism. The wrong eyes in the wrong head. Whatever the final consequence, it was clear that no secrets could be kept from this young man. Vael had a power in him to manipulate and destroy. The Doctor sensed it seething just under the surface. It would undoubtedly lead to trouble. Vael was more dangerous, more potentially deadly, than anyone the Doctor had ever met.

"It means trouble," said Vael.

"Take a look at the City. The dimensions are already collapsing. Any more flux will speed up the compaction. The Processes won't have a world to usurp."

Vael's cold eyes narrowed. A dangerous excitement tremored in his voice. "This is your ship," he said slowly.

"This whole city."

"Yes," growled the Doctor, and Vael shrank before his authority. "This is my ship. And its survival rests solely with me. Not with you, Vael. Nor with any other half-baked leech that gnaws and bleeds its systems."

The tower shuddered and creaked. The staircase lurched.

The Doctor stumbled and grabbed at the wall. It burned his hand. It was moving. The spiral stairway was starting to turn inside the tower's fixed shape.

He moved in beside Vael, keeping clear of the walls as they ground slowly upwards past them.

"They're taking us down!" Vael cried.

The stairway moved like the thread of an unwinding screw. The Doctor turned and ran up the spiral. He heard Vael pounding up behind him. "There's nowhere to go!"

"Isn't there?" he retorted and came to a stop as they reached the broken top. The rubble-strewn platform was slowly sinking down through the shaft of the tower like a drowning carousel. Dust plumed down from the hollow walls in which it turned.

"Where now?" demanded Vael.

The Doctor gazed up the dizzying length of the chimney.

The silver shape was there, hovering high above the open mouth of the walls. This effort might drain the last of the power, but he had to try. Those cold eyes in Vael's head were watching every move, but it was unavoidable. There was no other chance.

"Pilot ident!" the Doctor shouted.

The silver frame sank rapidly down the turning shaft to their level. Its centre flickered weakly with the ghosts of figures and symbols. Around the platform, the walls were starting to tremble.

"Access Architectural Configuration."

Small segments of masonry began to tumble around him. A crack began to widen in the wall above.

In for a penny, in for a pound. The Doctor tightened his fists and ordered, "Complete structural reconfiguration.

TARDIS Type 40. Return to original template."

"Send!"

A painful grating sound. The screen flared white for a moment. The turntable platform juddered in its descent. The remaining stars guttered and several died utterly.

"Cancel!" choked the Doctor, his throat raw with dust.

The grating ceased, but the dimensional gear change had failed to engage. The platform still wound slowly down between the crumbling walls. They were nearing the ground.

The Doctor shook his head in disgust. "Not enough power."

The screen still sank with them. Its frame had paled into the form of an attendant ghost.

"Localized configuration only," the Doctor called. "Let's take this gently. Tower staircase section. Extend... to whatever you can manage. Send!"

The remaining stars went out. Silence.

Something clicked into place. He heard a distant rumble that grew to a roar. The platform jolted violently. The Doctor grabbed Vael and threw himself at the stairway. Behind them, the platform fell apart in a tumble of planks and stone.

The stairway's descent stopped.

"Hang on tight!" yelled the Doctor. The tower walls began to crumble and fall away around them. They clung on to the edges as the stairway went into reverse. Turning at alarming speed, it spiralled up unsupported into the darkening air.

24: A Flight of Stairs

A report chittered to the Watch Tower.

An image from the eyes of a guard on the Phrontisterie artery.

The body of the older Process lay crumpled on the street.

All that old Now was being swept away.

The World responded to the young Process's

commands.

From the pinnacle of its Tower, the Process watched the shape of the World as it restructured.

The destruction, it assumed, was a necessary purge before the new shape of its new Now was begun.

The eyes of its new Captain showed another image.

Wilby the Doctor, trapped on the broken tower on the Middle Phase.

The trap was winding shut, driven by the collective will of its new guards, on whose energy the Process glutted itself.

This was its World. Its new Now.

A flash of light.

Masonry falling.

The guards fleeing.

Time in the City collides and shatters the planned possibilities.

The young Process howls its rage.

The tremors woke Ace. A continuous rumbling in the ground.

For a moment she heard a low animal gasp nearby, and then masonry crashed down somewhere further off. A glow was rising from the street. A carpet of tiny lights covered its length, thousands of brilliant little star flowers that darkened the empty sky above. The air had taken on a fresh chill.

A dark shape stood among the lights close to her. Ace cringed as it lurched nearer, extending a claw towards her.

"The future changes," it said.

In the strange underlit glow, she barely recognized him.

He wore one of the greatcoats again. It covered his body, but his head was as bare of hair as a bullet. His face was drawn and hollow. The weal on his cheek stood out strongly, and his glazed white eye stared from its torn socket.

"Pekkary?" she said.

He shivered and pulled the coat around him. The scabrous armour still covered his clenched hands.

"I'm just a possibility," he said, his voice weighted with exhaustion. "I may not live long."

Ace got slowly to her feet, ready to run. "Did you escape?"

"In my youth I was a slave. Then I became a guard to that monster. Now I am relieved of that cruel discipline." He turned towards the

massive shape of the dead Process and gave a deep sigh. "Who did this? Are there Heroes in the City?"

Ace went on the defence. "It was attacking the kid. I had to stop it. Do you want to make something of it?"

Pekkary bowed his head in awe. "Shonnzi was right about you. We should have listened. On my world, such a deed would be foretold in legend."

Ace kicked the ground awkwardly. "On my world, it wouldn't even make the *Ealing Gazette*." She eyed him cautiously. "When you were guards, in those helmet things, did you know what you were doing?"

"Our bodies were puppets, slaves to the Process's will.

But we knew. And we felt every blow we inflicted on ourselves."

"Gross," said Ace. "Sorry."

"Now that torture has been entrusted to another."

"I know," she said quietly. "Like wheels going round.

Pekkary and Pekkary Unlimited. And Pekkary and Pekkary and back to Pekkary... And you never get out of the loop."

"The details are changing." He knelt and touched the glowing flowers with his brutal claw. "There are many things I do not remember. So I may not live long. I am only a possibility on one branch of the Tree of Infinity."

He was still a cold fish, thought Ace. But he wasn't so morbid as he once had been — or still was somewhere across a mercury stream. This old Pekkary, faced with utter despair, was some-bow fused with a new hope.

"Where are the others?" she asked. "And what about Shonnzi? Was he released?"

Pekkary turned away. "I am the only one."

"They're still Guards then. But if you're free, they can be freed too!"

He was silent.

"Well?"

"No."

"No? What do you mean, no?"

He shook his head. "There are still possibilities to save them. On the First Phase of the City."

"Jesus. They're dead, aren't they?" The words sounded impossibly flat for what she felt.

"Where is Wilby the Doctor?" he said.

She was too stunned to answer. She listened to the ground rumbling its protest. The buildings had begun to creak as if terminal subsidence was setting in. Again she heard, but did not register, a brief burst of animal panting.

"But we let them go," she said. "They just walked away."

"That was a long time before. The summons cannot be broken. Where is the Doctor?"

"I don't know," she despaired. "I couldn't stop them. Vael took him off somewhere. It was a trap." She pointed to the Process. "But that thing was attacking the kid..."

She stopped. The monster's flank was undulating slightly. Its fins twitched.

Pekkary was looking up at the light tracery on the City above them. "We must find the Doctor quickly," he said.

"Vael has his own games to play. And the younger Process intends to assert a new regime. The City is already changing."

"Pekkary," called Ace, and she darted back in fright. The dead Process was slowly raising its head. Its voice came as a gurgled whisper. "The younger Process, its plan will fail!

This world, it is ruined. A new world will replace it. A new Beginning has already begun!"

A fresh tremor shook the ground. At the far end of the street, the walls supporting the isolated TARDIS attic caved in.

The Process's body convulsed as it started to struggle up. It snarled out its rage, proclaiming the threat of its recovery.

Ace grabbed Pekkary's claw. As they ran from the street, she saw a distant flash of light and something like a giant beanstalk coiling into the sky.

The Doctor's knuckles whitened as he crouched on the insane structure. The speeding air tore at him, trying to rip him from his perch as he watched the spinning City drop away beneath them.

Vael was spreadeagled on the stone steps below, too terrified to move. His eyes, somebody's eyes, were fixed on the Doctor.

The spiral stairway corkscrewed into the dark sky, its thread of steps growing on fresh beyond its broken end, swaying out unsupported into the abyss overhead.

The Doctor fished a pair of enhanced opera glasses marked "PROPRIETA DI VERONA ARENA" from his back pocket. He swung his knees round and lay prone along a step, his head jutting over the edge, watching the City as it turned under him.

The tower from which the spiralling stairway sprouted, crumbled away below. Its tumbling masonry scattered the guards in the glimmering street at its foot.

"Look at the view," he called, but Vael never shifted his eyes from the Doctor.

Three stolen segments of parallel Time, three versions of the same City were laid out around them on the inner sphere. An equivalent of Dante's Circles of Hell. One new, one ageing, one crumbled into ruin. Temporal tectonic plates set to grind together along their faultlines in a gargantuan timequake. It would crush his ship. His TARDIS, dying and already patterned throughout by a phosphorescent web of flowers when he hadn't even ordered a wreath.

From both of the other City segments, fixed to a future or past tower, an identical spindly stairway was coiling up.

Three stairways, defying the constants of gravity and Time, arching across the black gulf of inner space to form a new Now. Time and the infinite possibilities that ran from every second became a flood of impossibilities in a conformity of frenzied havoc. No law left un-overturned.

At the northern meeting point of the mercury streams crouched the vast, malignant edifice that the Doctor guessed to be the Processes'

fortress.

At the opposing inner pole lay a wide delta land devoid of buildings, but dense with the flowers: a fluorescent bloom of mould on the corpse of his ship. The ballooning of the area had increased markedly since he had first seen it.

Cracks were opening up across the swollen land. The mercury streams, unable to flow up in their original courses, were flooding the local City.

The sensations of rushing air and the turning panorama so elated the Doctor that he clambered to his feet on the turning stairway to get a better view.

Vael yelled a warning, but was ignored. These final powers, available to the Doctor only in this ultimate crisis, had to be observed. He was manipulating just three dimensions at present. How many others were available? He was tempted to seize the Temporal dimension, rolling it back to crush the invaders of his ship that way. He could manipulate the relative dimensions of Imagination and Inner Space-Time to create whatever he liked.

So many possibilities.

It was no good. The dizzying rotation of the stairway was slowing like the end of a fairground ride. Across the black sky, the other stairspirals were converging to meet his own. The steam had run out and the organ music in his head faded.

The stairways came together at last in the centre of the sky. A fragile triad bridge was formed, a graceful union of the three segments of the sphere they trisected.

The turning stopped with a jolt that caught the Doctor off balance. His hands flailed out as he stumbled sideways and tipped over the side.

He caught at the edge of a stair, dangling over the drop, his legs swinging wildly.

Vael got to his feet and crouched by the Doctor. "Will it save you?" he said.

"What?" gasped the Doctor. "Help me up! Help me!"

"Your ship. Will it float you down to the ground, the same way it

caught Ace and Shonnzi?"

The Doctor grappled with the stair, his fingers slowly slipping. "Help me up, Vael! No power left!"

Vael's cold, cruel eyes again, like the eyes of a big cat.

A female. The females were always the hunters.

" *Tell me about Rassilon*," said Vael's voice in his head.

The Doctor took a calculated risk and let go of the stair.

He fell for several thousand nanoseconds longer than he would have liked before Vael's hand lashed down and gripped his arm. The strength that lifted him easily back on to the stairway was scarcely natural.

"Thank you," he said, sitting down on a step. "I didn't want to hang around all day." He pulled at his jumper; it was torn and unravelling at the seam under one arm.

"You have an unbelievable mind, Doctor," Vael said.

"How do you ever find anything in there?"

The Doctor smiled grimly. "Let me know when you find a genius with a tidy workbench." He pulled at a string of wool and the seam unstitched itself further. "Why Rassilon?" he said casually. "What would I know about him?"

"Because your thoughts are full of him."

"My thoughts are my own business. And this is not the place or time to debate Gallifreyan history." He turned and walked away up the coiling steps. "And don't pester me about the ship any more. It's as good as dead already. Just a matter of time before it breaks up."

"Where are you going?" called Vael and crawled after the Doctor on hands and knees.

There was a distant rumble. Clouds of dust were billowing up across the Phases of the shrinking sphere City.

The Doctor halted and gave an involuntary shudder.

Vael stared out into the dark. "It's going," he said. "Your ship."

"The Process will destroy it from the Beginning. There's no power to resist."

"You have the power," said Vael. "It's in your mind. You and the ship are in mutual symbiosis."

The Doctor studied him for a moment. "Vael," he said excitedly, "I think I needed someone to remind me about that. Are all the Gallifreyans in your time like you?"

"No. What about you and your time?"

"Thereby hangs a tale," said the Doctor, firmly closing his mind to the young man's prying tendrils of thought. He sat on a step and kicked his legs over the side. Resting his chin in his hands and elbows on his knees, he closed his eyes and concentrated.

The empty ache gnawing in the pit of his stomach opened out into a pool of despair and guilt. His home was dying. Not his nominal home of Gallifrey, but the bizarre, extradimensional entity that he had come to rely on. He had taken his TARDIS for granted for too long. He doubted that, were he not soon to be crushed alive in its final total compaction, he could survive without it.

Its life was drained by the grotesque leech that bled its dimensions. But he still had its instinct for survival. That was why the TARDIS had sustained him. It needed him too. He would never lose their will to survive.

"It's working," said Vael.

The Doctor opened his eyes and saw the ghost of the silver frame hovering in the air before him. His determination grew and the shape of the reality window resolved correspondingly.

Its shape, flickering with *geistlicht*, hardened from a virtual reality into truth. Menus and manager files darted across its centre.

"Pilot ident," commanded the Doctor.

The window gleeped a response.

"Access Ship Status Report."

Labelled blocks of colour darted across the screen, registering and cross-referencing the TARDIS's functional parameters. Half were dead,

the rest on "DANGER."

On the City Phase below, a fire had broken out on the arteries close to the Wall of Clouds.

"Stand by Architectural Configuration," he said without taking his concentration from the window. The screen cleared in readiness.

He pointed in a multitude of directions. Up, down or across. "There's no point in staying here. Which way should we go, Vael? I think we can manage one command function."

"To the Beginning," said the young man. "Before the Beginning reaches us."

The Doctor looked down at the south pole of the City.

The tumescent ground was splitting across. Something immense and luminous was slowly forcing its way up. A globular shape like the head of a newborn child. He could see tremors running in ripples out through the buildings on all the Phases.

To the north, diametrically opposed, lay the black presence of the Watch Tower.

"One chance only," said the Doctor. He turned to the window and concentrated his thoughts. "Relocate base of stairway." He paused and tightened his fists. One error and the very dangerous young man standing behind him would simply tip him over the edge.

"Relocate at the Watch Tower!" he snapped.

"No!" shouted Vael.

"Send!"

Vael lunged towards the Doctor, his eyes burning with hatred. Then he gave a sudden cry. He lurched back like a puppet as if another hand had dragged him.

" *Leave him!* "

"Temper," said the Doctor.

He heard the woman's voice in Vael's head and saw the inner eye, the predatory cat's eye, that controlled the young man.

The Doctor braced himself for the inevitable lurch as his instruction took effect. He could hear Vael's uneasy breathing close behind him. Beneath that, he heard a distant clank of machinery.

He was pondering this when he realized that the stairs had moved already. The three spans of the arch had imperceptibly pivoted on their central fulcrum, swinging to the norths of their respective Cities. Each stairway now led down to the iron gate of the Watch Tower on its segment of the sphere.

"All it needed was an expert's touch," he sighed.

The screen flickered weakly and dissolved away into the air.

"That's that as far as available power's concerned," he said flatly. "From now on it'll be purely a salvage job."

Vael was silent.

The Doctor looked away to the south, where the glowing object was forcing its way out of the fractured ground.

"Look," he said with a scowl. "The Beginning is starting at last. You were right again, Vael. Best to head it off before it reaches us. Come on."

He set off down the vertiginous spiral, down one strand of the thin arrow head of stairs that rose above the Process's Watch Tower. Vael Voryunsti Sheverell, his mind half crushed by the hunting eye that burned in his head, edged down the dizzying flights of steps after his quarry.

25: Spring Tide

When the quakes started, the Phazel slaves left their search amongst the artery lanes of the First Phase and headed for the safety of open ground. There were no guards to stop them. From the bank of the mercury stream, they watched the buildings of the City collapsing. The stream was narrowing as its banks edged closer together. The surface was disturbed, flowing in smooth, fast waves that set the protesting millwheel spinning. Mercury spilled across the bank in wide, mirrored globules amongst the sea of glowing flowers. Above the stream, the dark air shimmered as the separated Time lines of the City Phases came into agitated fractal conjunction.

The Phazels sat in their chairs on the bank near the smoke forest and watched the deadly play of the Gods. The constant rumble in the ground was punctuated by the latest crashes of splintering stone and falling masonry. The end of the world, if this was what they were witnessing, was embodied in a huge glowing canker that slowly emerged from the bloated land away to the south.

The City across the stream no longer bore relation to the Now in which they lived. Buildings that collapsed here were still standing in the next Now.

Through the shimmering of fractured Time, Captain Pekkary saw two figures moving through the light flowers on the opposite bank. One of them waved in desperation at them. It was the girl, Ace. The intruder they had handed over to Vael. He did not recognize the other shape. It was gaunt and had a tiny hairless head. It was wrapped in a long, heavy coat.

Amid protests from his crew, Pekkary walked down to meet them. Chesperl and Amnoni followed. Reogus held back, certain that this was another trap. But recriminations could not be harboured at a time like this. They were certainly all doomed.

The two figures moved along the far bank. They were searching for a way across, but the stepping stones were lost in the mercury torrent.

Ace was calling to him. Her voice came through the temporal interface mangled and unintelligible. She remonstrated with the other figure who turned and ran back towards the City.

The Phazels watched Ace's arms sweeping out in explosive gestures, but they understood nothing. She pointed repeatedly to the coiling strands of grey that rose into the sky from both the Cities.

Finally, the other figure appeared, dragging a roll of heavy material that he had fetched from the buildings nearby. Ace ran to help him.

Pekkary felt his arm gently taken. "Quennesander Olyesti," said Amnoni, "you know who that is, don't you?"

He gazed through the shimmering air as the bizarre companions came down to the opposite edge of the stream.

With a sudden nauseous chill, Pekkary finally recognized himself. A phantom from the farthest Future, beyond slavery and beyond guard duty. Fascinated by what he scarcely dared meet, Pekkary went to

face them across the flow.

They were partly unrolling the package across the ground. It was a length of carpet. They weighted down one end with a pile of rocks and then the gaunt figure lifted the bulk of the roll up high. With a strength that only a guard could have shown, he threw it across the stream.

The Phazels caught the unravelling missile and weighted their end down. The length of dark red carpet was patterned with intertwining lines and knots of colour. It spanned the gulf between Times, twisting dangerously against the surface surge of the mercury stream.

The oldest Pekkary steadied his side of the flimsy bridge as Ace started to edge across on all fours. The carpet sagged and mercury flowed around her hands and knees.

Her eyes were closed. The young Captain Pekkary could see her through the shimmering air, mouthing strangely abrupt encouragements to herself as she forced her way towards him. The bridge swayed violently for a moment and she clung to it, unable to move for fear.

Finally, it settled and she edged on again. Arms reached out to her and she was hauled to safety. "Hold it tight for Pekkary," was all she said, and she crouched on the carpet herself.

The older Pekkary had piled more rocks on to his end of the bridge. He set out slowly, inching across the torrent on the swaying length, his coat trailing in the stream.

Suddenly the ground juddered with a tremor. The pile of rocks on the far bank collapsed and the carpet slewed into the stream. The old man clung tight as mercury surged around him.

Ace yelled and the Phazels began to haul at the carpet.

Slowly it came in, dragging the older Pekkary with it. They pulled him out of the stream and he stood gasping before them.

The young Pekkary stared at the parody of himself: the face scarred, one-eyed and cadaverous, the body covered with monstrous growths, the heavy coat beaded with tiny globules of silver.

The look was returned with a fusion of determination and despair. "I'm just a possibility, that is all," said the old man. He studied each of

the Phazels in turn, but his look returned finally to his younger self. "I may not live long."

The younger lifted his hand to his own face. "What happened to my eye?" he said.

"Time changes," replied his elder. "The flow of events that created me may not now occur.

"Will we ever be free of this place?"

The old man glanced towards the next City across the stream. "The structures of the Future sustain even when their Past is shattered. But lives can be altered."

"Why are you staring at me?" blustered Reogus. "Go back to the Future where you belong." He pointed at Ace.

"And take her with you!"

"Reogus Teleem," the old Pekkary replied, "do not provoke the Future when you know nothing of what it holds.

There are many ways of escape, but Ace and the Doctor are the only source of hope."

Young Pekkary turned to Ace. "Can you prove that?"

Her eyes darted up to her companion for guidance. "I could prove it, but the Doctor would do it better."

"How do we know that?" complained Reogus. "It's their fault we're trapped here."

Chesperl pulled him back. "Why have you come alone?"

she asked.

"If you come from the Future, where are the others?"

said Amnoni.

"I am just a possibility...," began the old Captain.

His younger self nodded. "It is because ultimately we have no Future at all," he said.

"Why don't you listen?" exploded Ace. "It affects me too.

We can still have a Future if we do something now!"

There was a deep boom that echoed shuddering through the ground and air, trapped in the confines of the shrinking sphere. Waves of mercury spilled from the stream as the banks edged closer together. The Phazels stared up across the rising City. It was wreathed in a smog of dust and smoke caused by the devastation. From the south pole, which stood at a rough right angle to their position, an immense mottled moon had torn itself free of the world. A vast orb of glutinous light that rose slowly out above the cratered wound of its birth.

"It's an omen of death," shouted Reogus.

"Reogus," said Chesperl. "Shut up!"

The young Captain turned to Ace. "What does it mean?"

he despaired.

"I don't know."

"Then give us just one sign of hope," he said. "Just one!"

"Here we go again," she muttered. "You've forgotten where you came from, right?"

"The Gods brought us to this place..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I told you all this once already — in your Future. The Doctor'll probably kill me if he finds out, but you have to know."

She paused, apparently unsure of what to say.

"Tell them, Ace," said the old man quietly.

"You're from Gallifrey," she said and waited for the lightning bolt.

Step after step. It was as much as Vael could do to keep the Doctor in sight. The downward spiral of the stairs at this speed was dizzying. Below him, the Watch Tower loomed nearer. In its tangled fortress of iron, the Process was waiting. And all the time, the Sphinx eye in his head was demanding and accusing. He set his thoughts against it, lurching helplessly down the endless steps. Trying to veer away from the edge.

The eye was screaming at him, but he dared not listen.

" *Vael!* " it shrieked. " *Listen to me. Answer the riddles!* "

He attempted a blast of defiance, but his will was weakening. " *I am myself. An Individual!* "

Step after step on the stairs.

" *I have chosen you, Vael. Listen to me. You are my successor!* "

Step after step after step on the twisting stairs and the eye that stares has steeped his mind and he cannot stop as he steps from the steps on the steep stepped stairs The darkness opened beneath him. His legs buckled.

He fell.

The Doctor shrugged wearily and scooped up Vael's unconscious body from the stairs. It was light and wasted.

Drained, like everything else that came into contact with the Process.

He was almost level with the top pinnacle of the Watch Tower. The fractured chimes of the bells clanked out. In answer, the great booming echo thundered through the world. A new baleful light fell from directly overhead. By leaning out from the edge of the stair, he could just see the newborn full moon as it began its journey across the empty sky centre of the sphere.

Whole sections of the city were collapsing under the pressure of the contracting world. The events the older Process had set in motion were unstoppable. The Beginning was coming to meet them.

"I am her successor," Vael muttered in a semiconscious delirium. "I am an Individual."

"You're a freak," said the Doctor. "I know how you feel."

He put off the chance to look into Vael's helpless mind, for fear of what might be lurking there. Instead, he set off down the steps with his burden.

He set his thoughts to the recovery of his ship and the fight he might have to regain its control. From SARDIT back to TARDIS. But no matter how he concentrated, unwanted ideas continued to clutter his mind. Fragments of knowledge of the Old Time. Morsels he had

gleaned from history books or lectures at Academy. The cult of the Individuals, the barbaric regime of the Mythic line, the matronymic dynasties

— real families with real children. And white sand imported for the Games from Mirphak 2 because it showed up the blood better.

And sometimes more than certainty that details were wrong in the histories, and that race memory served him better than the biased and doctored speculations of archaeologists.

Down the stairs he came to he knew not what.

"There you are at last," he called to the group of guards who were climbing the stairs to meet him. "Tell the Process that I'm ready to see it now."

Clawed hands seized him and carried him down the spiral.

Out of the gate of the Tower lurched the Process.

"You took your time," called the Doctor, aware even before he started that his sarcasm would be wasted. He caught the rotting stench that came off the brute as it cartwheeled closer.

"Wilby, you are trapped. The Future, where is it?"

"Coming soon," said the Doctor. "In the meanwhile, you're in trouble."

The Process lifted its head to stare at the new moon's slow descent from the southern zenith. The arrowhead frame of stairways rising from around the Tower marked out its direct collision course with them.

The monster spluttered its rage. "Wilby, this is your work!"

"No."

It arched towards him, rearing hungrily, teeth flexing.

The guards' claws were biting into his arms and Vael was becoming a dead weight.

"All that information you gorged yourself on," he snapped. "What a criminal waste! If you kill me, you'll never find out what's happening before the Future arrives."

"I will know!"

There was a grated clank of metal as the whole Tower that loomed above them shuddered in the latest tremor.

"You see," affirmed the Doctor. "It's all collapsing in on itself. Soon it won't be your miserable world at all."

The Process swept its head up in a wide arc to survey the parlous state of its universe. "More guards!" it croaked to its beetle-headed minions. "Recruit the other Phazels!"

The Doctor decided to laugh mockingly. "Your world's a complete shambles, Process. But not for much longer! Soon it'll be back with its rightful owner!"

"This Wilby, he has nothing to say," remarked the Process. "Bring him in."

The unconscious body of Vael was snatched out of the Doctor's arms. For a moment he thought he recognized the guard that lifted him bodily off the ground. It hefted him clumsily over its shoulder. As it carried him in through the Tower's gate, he cursed himself for behaving no better than so many of the villains and maniacs it had been his lot to overthrow. Gloating was always their downfall.

26: Moon Shadows

The stream had shrunken to a thin, forced torrent as the rumbling Phases of the City edged together. The temporal interface in the air crackled above its course. Mercury was flooding across the wide banks, drowning the sea of light flowers and creating silvered lakes in the bizarre moonlight.

The older Pekkary had built a fire on the higher ground away from the stream. The other Phazels gathered around it as the old Captain produced two dusty bottles out of his coat pockets. Ace used the corkscrew on her IC Swiss Army knife to open them. One bottle of *Entre-trois-Mondes cuvée*, produce of Trispheres, and one bottle of cheap cooking sherry, both remnants from the TARDIS's wine racks.

"These would be better from the Third Phase of the City, where they've had a chance to mature longer," said Pekkary.

"They'll do," said Ace and swigged at the sherry.

The Phazels passed the bottles between them. They had been silent since Ace had spoken the forbidden. They exchanged glances as if they no longer needed to speak words to communicate. Against all the despair and destruction that worked around them, Ace caught a new sense of relief in the group, a definite warmth of rediscovering something precious and long lost. She had caused that. It could not be wrong.

They lay among the flowers on the trembling ground like the spokes of a wheel, their heads towards the hub of the fire. Both the Pekkarys and Amnoni Distuyssor. Chesperl and Reogus with their outstretched hands intertwined and their futures doomed. Tiny curls of grey drifted from the ground around them, the germinating shoots of smoke that sometimes grew up in the still air to form a forest in this place. Overhead, the new moon coursed slowly up from its birthplace, shrouded in the clouds of dust that rose from the crumbling City.

Ace sat near to the Phazels, the warm glow growing in her. The drink was going to her head, but it didn't matter right now. There'd been nights like this on Horsenden Hill. A fire and her mates and drink and whatever... and a hangover in the morning. She understood the memories she had triggered in the Phazels — their previous lives on Gallifrey, the homes and families they had forgotten. Things that in similar circumstances she would have tried her damnedest to leave shut in the cupboard.

There was enough to worry about already. If the TARDIS was protecting the Doctor, how safe were the rest of them? The ship seemed to use them as it pleased. They were the resources available, but the Doctor was the only one the TARDIS really needed.

The fire flickered up into fantastical shapes at the heart of the thought wheel. Different colours and strange landscapes in the flames and rising smoke.

" *Listen. Do you hear it! Time is stirring. Like the ice breaking on the rivers of Gallifrey in spring.*"

" *Yes, I can hear.*"

" *Friends. We are meeting once more. Your thoughts are lacing with mine again.*"

" *How rich this is. Speaking with words is so unbearably slow.*"

" *Gallifrey. Do you remember the blazing sunlight in the open sky? Not just night, but night and day*."

" *And the green forests and the golden fields. And the burnt red deserts*."

" *And the wind moving the leaves and the water?* "

" *The smoky cities, full of other people's faces and thoughts. The endless flowing and muttering of the air*."

" *The great Imperial merchant ships carrying the slaves from other worlds and the Games and the Heroes?* "

" *We shall find a way out of this grey, dead prison now.*

Time is moving. The shackles have broken. Now we remember."

" *We begin a new Future*."

" *You remember Pazithi Gallifreya, the copper moon who shines even in the sunlight?* "

"Better than that miserable, sickly object," said Reogus aloud, pointing up at the sky. They all laughed at Ace's startled look.

" *And remember the children?* "

"The Pilot," exclaimed Amnoni Distuyssor. "We forgot him. He should be with us."

The urchin Pilot snitched the half biscuit from the alcove. He didn't understand why the flowers had been left there, nor what the strange letters SHONZY that were scraped on the stone meant. It was just as stupid as the offerings to the Gods that the Phazels left beside the Dial Square. He always snitched those too.

There was slime on the street where Ace had attacked the Process. And there was black blood in the slime. But it hadn't done any good. The only way to destroy the Process was from the Beginning. The Doctor had told him that when he was asleep. Delete the Process before it is even born, so that it had never existed at all.

It was happening at last. The Beginning was up in the sky waiting to start again. And he had to tell the Doctor.

" *Don't forget to remind me*," said the Doctor in the dream. " *One day I'll need you to remind me*."

Until then, he had to steer clear of trouble. And steer clear of the Future, his own Future, the Future that was waiting to get him.

But the Doctor had disappeared. The goik had got him.

And now the whole City was scrunching slowly together. The buildings were crumbling and rocking like the dust castles Shonnzi sometimes made on the banks of the stream.

" *Shonnzi*."

The name in his head startled him. It was their voices.

Reogus and Noni and Chesperl and Pekkary. All of them calling, just like they used to before they got boring and grumbly and didn't talk to him anymore.

" *Shonnzi. Where are you? It'll soon be time to go*."

He could have told them that. Silly old grumblies.

A moon shadow fell across him. A guard stared cruelly down. He recognized it. His lost Future chittering angrily.

The Shonnzi guard.

He turned and ran, but a whip cracked and stung his legs. It dragged him back through the flowers.

The urchin yelled and kicked as he was lifted off the ground by those familiar hands.

" *Shonnzi. Where are you?* " called the voices.

"Help me!" he yelled.

The guard faltered for a moment at the sound of the voices. By rights they called him too, but he, Shonnzi, no longer existed. He could not hear, so he did not listen. The hands tightened into claws and Pilot was dragged screaming away.

"We must find him!" Amnoni despaired.

This was the first outburst after several minutes of silent gesticulation between the Phazels. They still lay on the ground m a circle, staring up at the dust-filled sky and waving their arms like overturned beetles.

"Find who?" butted in Ace. "I don't know where the Doctor is. But that creep Vael's probably with him. And we know what's happened to Shonnzi."

There were more silent recriminations between the crew.

"Oi!" Ace complained as she walked round the circle.

"Don't mind me in all this. I'm just the token div-brain human.

Who are you after?"

"Not Shonnzi, but the Pilot Shonnzi," said the older Pekkary.

"The kid? Aren't there rules about child labour where you come from?"

Chesperl sat up and turned to Ace. "We're sorry, Ace.

After so long deprived of our own powers, we do understand how difficult it is to exist as a non-telepath."

"Thanks," said Ace. "I'll just think aloud so that you don't miss anything vital. If you all talk like that at home, Gallifrey must be the quietest dullsville in the universe."

"You must be joking," said Reogus. "It's just about the noisiest. There's not a minute's peace."

"We will find a way back now," said Amnoni. "The chain of Time is broken. But we need the Pilot."

"The guards have taken him," said Captain Pekkary.

The older Pekkary was touching his own cheek with his fingers, running them along the gully of the scar. "And we must find him before..."

"Before there's no more Shonnzi at all," said Ace. "I get the picture. They'll have taken him to the Tower, and I bet that's where the Doctor is headed too."

"A bet?" said Reogus. "How much?"

There was a grinding crash from the stream. Mercury fountained up and the air flared and crackled with static. The two banks of the Cities were grinding together, sending tremors across the Time and Space.

Through the tumult they heard the cracked whisper of the Process. "The world, it is being renewed! Escape, there is none!"

The Guard Captain, the third of the Pekkarys, stood between the Phazels and the City. Its guards chittered as they closed in, whips uncurled, blocking all chance of escape.

Chesperl pulled Reogus back before he could even start to retaliate.

"Where's my guard?" he said, suddenly too afraid to think.

"There's no Shonnzi either," said the oldest Pekkary.

Ace stared at the five guards. Four of them were tall, the doomed futures of the Phazels. But the fifth was shorter. It moved slowly in, its whip raised, the repulsive eyes squirming on its enforced helmet like the Medusa's hair.

Ace shank away from it. In the original guards, this was the creature that had carried her to the Watch Tower. But those guards were dead now. This group of guards was the second group of Phazels. They were in her future too.

Why had she assumed she was exempt? Her future was all tied up. She was as much a victim of Time's tyranny in this world as the rest of them. She was trapped on the same sinking boat, drowning in a flood of mercury and black blood.

Somehow, sometime, she would be caught and

recruited as well. Forced back into her own past to enslave and torment herself. And finally she would die, useless and wasted, fodder for the Process's insatiable hunger. The vileness of it ached in her every bone.

She turned away, wanting to scream. The oldest Pekkary caught her in his thin arms. "It can be changed," he whispered. "The possibilities are infinite from every second."

Ace could not speak.

"The Phazels," croaked the leech's voice through its Captain. "Bring them to the Watch Tower."

"No," called the youngest Pekkary. "We have a different future now. We are a crew again."

Silent glances between the Phazels confirmed their alliance.

"We reject you as our future," they chorused aloud.

The oldest Pekkary called a warning as his youngest self stepped defiantly forward.

"Obedience," stated the Guard Captain. "You are all summoned as guards."

The ground shuddered as the colliding Time Phases tore against each other. Ace saw her guard raise its scorpion whip. She yelled in horror.

The tongue cracked across young Pekkary's face. He screamed and fell forward. Blood was running down his cheek.

The oldest Captain clutched at the wound on his own face.

The other Phazels clustered around their wounded leader. As they pulled him up, Ace saw that his eye was torn. She launched herself with a scream towards the monstrous guard that she was doomed to become.

The old Captain pulled her back.

"But I have to," she yelled. "I have to stop it!"

"Not yet," he whispered.

Again the remorseless voice of the Process croaked through the throat of its instrument, the Guard Captain.

"Escape, there is none! The Future, it is already planned. It cannot be changed!"

27: An Eye for an Eye

They changed the food in her cage each morning, but it went untouched.

She sat rapt in her contemplation of the Sphinx's eye in her hand. A dead, jellied thing through which she stared like a window on Eternity. Her arm stretched through its depths to clasp at what was lost.

Vael, her chosen one, was trapped in some closed nightmare prison beyond the bounds of reality. He fought against her call with his thoughts like a caged animal, but he could not resist one so ancient and wise as she. There would be ways to bring him back to heel.

The eye in her hand returned the powers she had lost.

She sought through the depths of Eternity for other wisdoms she knew. But across the Universe, the voices of truth were falling silent.

The Sphinx of Thule was murdered. The Logistomancer of A32K, foreseer of that cold empire of logic for ten thousand years, was in her final systems dotage with no sign of a successor program.

Time was growing murky. Seeing was no longer an easy gift. From the nest-worlds of Klanti came rumours that the Core Sybilline had succumbed to a male and her power was diminished. The Pythia still caught distant thoughts from Sosostris in the West Spiral, but they were mordant and cloudy. The voice from the North Constellations of The-Nameless-That-Sees-All was silent.

The Pythia foresaw a point when there might be no more seers. The web of thought that linked the augurers and oracles of the Universe was broken. The veil of Time would no longer be pierced by thought, it would have to be physically travelled. She had foreseen that long ago. Why else had she instigated the Time program? Her powers, branded as superstition by the faithless, were drawing to an end. The Universe would become an empty and desolate place. She would soon be a lone voice.

That is what the eye of the Sphinx showed her. But such visions could be clouded or misunderstood. She reached for Vael's mind again. Vael held keys that would unlock the future.

In the darkness where Vael was trapped, she had touched another mind as well. It was a mind of great power, a mind beyond the strictures of Time. In that briefest encounter, she had immediately recognized an equal. She would find this mind again and consult its wisdom, just as the mighty had once come to consult her. For she must know the future.

But in that mind she had also glimpsed thoughts that chilled her. It claimed to be born of Gallifrey. But she was Gallifrey, knowledge and life. How could she not know this mind already? Unless... unless it had yet to be born.

And in this complex, bewildering mind, she had also glimpsed the name of Rassilon.

Above all things, she feared that name.

She must know the future.

In the empty void beyond Time, she found Vael again.

He no longer resisted, but his thoughts were dull and confused. The Pythia could no longer see, but she must know. Her luck was cursed. Only the Sphinx could see truly, so she must have the Sphinx's sight.

The formal assembly of one hundred councillors, who sat in the cavern below, watching her cage, awaiting her death, were deafened by the Pythia's scream. Clinging to the wicker of her cage, she gouged out her own eye and inserted the eye of the Sphinx in its place.

There was a new moon in the sky. Slowly rising to its zenith through nebulae of flowing dust. A smoking caldera, surrounded by ruined buildings, marked its birthplace on the world below. The moon glowed from within, seeming to the Pythia like a luminous skull. When it had reached the centre of the sky, she saw that it would begin its descent like a slow comet on the squat, black, fortified structure that lay in its path.

This was not what the Doctor had in mind. If he was going to be in at the Beginning, he should not be dangling upside down like a cocooned fly in an iron spider's web.

Vael was dangling in a cocoon next to him, pretending to be unconscious. Around them, the machinery of the Watch Tower clanked and spun with a vicious alacrity. The sort of thing Brunel would have appreciated.

Directly overhead, the new moon would be moving inexorably across the enclosed sky, south to north, set on a slow collision course with the Tower as its target. The Process had left its prisoners and slithered off through the gantries. The leech was apparently ignorant of the imminent destruction of its host environment. It seemed to imagine that it was about to triumph and was even preparing a celebration to that end.

The Doctor squirmed inside the glittering mesh, contracting muscles and sinews in the way Harry Houdini had shown him. But the cocoon bit too tightly. To his discomfort he noticed, lying on the edge of the

high, slimy platform below him, several discarded human bones.

Outside, the inverted Phases of his SARDIT/TARDIS

were grinding together as the dimensions compacted. Ace was still out there. He had to find Ace, because he had seen her future and must sever that time-line possibility before she discovered her cruel fate.

The Watch Tower straddled all three Phases of the City and should have been the first thing to collapse. Instead, its many iron legs shifted and compensated as necessary.

Constantly adjusting the fortress's stability as the ground slid and shuddered under it. Something Rassilon would have appreciated.

Rassilon again.

"Must you keep planting ideas in my head?" he complained loudly to Vael.

There was a moment's pause and then the muffled voice from the next cocoon said. "If you really are Gallifreyan, why do you ask so much about Gallifrey?"

"Idle curiosity, that's all," replied the Doctor quickly. "It's a long time since I was there."

"Much more than that, I think," Vael said. "Your thoughts are full of Ancient Gallifrey. Gallifrey in the past. Somewhere I think you cannot go."

Unreadable subconscious instincts warned the Doctor that Vael was just as dangerous and perceptive as he had feared. "If you can read my thoughts," he said, "you can see that I am bound by laws."

"When it suits you, Doctor. But your mind is insatiably inquisitive."

"Take no notice. I'm naturally a curious person."

"Very curious indeed. So what can I tell you?"

"Sorry," said the Doctor, injecting a smile into his voice.

"I'm not interested. I have pressing engagements."

"You want to know of the great sea of thought, when all Gallifrey was of one mind."

"Not particularly."

"Why? Does Gallifrey change so much? Is such telepathic power lost, so that you no longer know of it?"

"Some other time," the Doctor insisted. "Do you know anything about escapology?"

"When do you come from? How distant in the future, that you travel in a ship that can become a whole city?"

"There is only Now," said the Doctor firmly.

"But one Now can collide with another." The voice was changing. It became higher and older. Female. Catlike. The Doctor could no longer tell if it was speaking aloud or exclusively in his head. "Come, Doctor," it wheedled, "we will bargain."

"Bargain?" He was determined to keep talking.

"I will tell you of Gallifrey, this Ancient Gallifrey of yours.

Of the Great Empire and the mighty wise ones who see to the nine corners of the Universe."

"I can read all that in books."

"Books are as narrow-minded and subjective as the historians who scrawl them. I am the voice of the past. I can tell you all the secrets that your hearts crave to know."

"And?"

"Then you shall tell me of the future."

"Yes. I thought it might come to that."

The urgency in the voice was growing, but the Doctor could not quite decide if it was driven by greed or despair.

"Tell me of the people and the Heroes," it cried. "Of the great deeds and the legends fulfilled. Of the mighty ships that will travel the bounds of Time... and the mighty rulers who will despatch them. Answer the questions, Doctor, and all the forbidden secrets of the past shall be yours."

"You're not Vael," said the Doctor.

"Of course not. Vael is not yet ready for the power he will inherit."

"You're the eye in his head. Who are you?"

"Answer my questions and I will tell you."

The Doctor shook his heavy head. It was hard to think at all. Hanging upside down, all his blood was running to his brain. "I cannot," he said.

"Then live the rest of your pitiful short life in ignorance and pain, wondering what you will never know!"

"How strange," the Doctor observed. "I once said exactly that to a Tellurian police constable. It seems like only yesterday."

"You cannot resist," said the voice.

There was silence.

A very long silence.

"One question each way," said the Doctor at last. He also thought, you're a fool, Doctor. But that was in a separate subconscious.

"Agreed," said the voice.

"No trickery. We think the questions together and the truth after."

"Agreed."

The Doctor let his mind go blank. In his subconscious, he braced himself to deal with one riddle. Its implications were unknown, and their effect might be devastating for all of Gallifreyan history. Knowledge could be a dangerous thing. But he had bound himself by the laws of honour and would not resist.

He thought-sent his one question. It was all he needed to know.

" *Who are you?* "

Into his head came the balancing question and the scales tilted against him. The voice asked the same riddle in inversion.

It asked, " *Who am I?* "

A moment's silence. The Doctor eased out a slow breath. He could

guess the identity of the voice. It terrified him. She came from the Dark Time before Rassilon came to power, but she knew of that great Hero. He was plainly an obsession. Only one figure at that time, maybe two figures, wielded such powers of telepathy as she exhibited. She spoke of a successor, but that was not in the history books.

The whole of Gallifrey's development rested on one moment in Time. One terrible accursed moment which he might now undo with his meddling. The turmoil that led to Rassilon's assumption of power might never occur. No Triumvirate of rulers, no Intuitive Revelation, no Time Lords.

"The answers," said her voice. "Together."

"Yes," said the Doctor.

But he held back as his head flooded with her response.

I am the five hundred and eighth Pythia in the line of Gallifrey. I am the Crown of the Empire, Mouthpiece of the Gods and Guardian of the Great Book of Future Legends. I see the Past, Present and Future as one. Through me, all thoughts meet, all Time is fertile. I am the hub of the world. I am Gallifrey.

The Doctor still held back.

"These are just titles," he said. "In my time there are no more Future Legends. The Book is a relic. Its predictions were all used up ages ago. It's all got rather boring."

"This is trickery!" she cried. "You are bound to answer my question!"

"Yes," he said.

"Who am I?"

The Doctor sighed. "In the history books, you are the last of the Pythias."

This time the silence was on her side.

"I knew you wouldn't like it," he added.

"Impossible! I have chosen my successor. How can this be?"

"You've had your question," he snapped. But to annoy her, be added, "Perhaps you should have asked who I am?"

She was not listening. "Vael will return to Gallifrey," she cried. "The Book of Future Legends foretells that my successor will be a man. I have chosen him."

"Then I should look at it again. Those books of predictions are notoriously cryptic. I suspect it says the next *ruler* after you will be a man."

The Doctor heard Vael choke. The Pythia's voice projected through his mind, crackled like fading reception on an old radio. "You lie!"

"Do I?" he retorted. "You know better than that. You've been clumping round my head in your hobnail thoughts for long enough."

There was a last cry of anguish. "Who are the Time Lords? Who are you?"

"Nothing to do with your time, venerable one."

"Liar!"

That accusation cut deep.

As her distorted voice faded completely, he heard: "Vael will succeed me. Not Rassilon. I have chosen!"

There were crashing sounds from all around. Showers of falling masonry were striking against the iron Tower.

The three spindly stairways rose from the edges of the Watch Tower, one from each Time Phase of the Process's World City. They met at the centre of the sky in an arrowheaded chevron, aimed at the oncoming moon.

The vast globe struck the pinnacle dead-centre. The stairways bowed and shattered into a cascade of stone, tumbling against the crude, jutting flanks of the Tower beneath.

The Pythia stared at the destruction around her. All the detritus of the Universe had accumulated in this place. All the flotsam of Time was cast into this grey limbo. These images filled her with dread. Why was she watching? If this was the Future, she did not want to see. She willed herself to return to her cage and her cavern, but could not break away. This reality beyond Time stayed lodged in her head and she was fascinated.

And then, in her distress, she knew.

Vael had driven her to look. Just as she had watched through his eyes, he now watched through hers. His was the idea, inserted unbidden into her head. His burgeoning power was greater than she had anticipated. Vael Voryunsti Sheverell, her chosen successor, was an inspired but dangerous choice. The pupil now taught the tutor. One day, when *he* is Gallifrey, the Empire will quake before his power.

" *Vael*," she cried. " *I await your return!* "

" *When I am ready*," came his dismissive reply.

Ready? He was a prisoner, trapped in a monster's web.

Whatever else Vael was, her little novice was not a Hero. He needed her wisdom to escape. And she needed him. The brittleness of her aged bones and the excruciating pain in her eye were becoming unbearable. She would cling fast until he answered.

There was no further response. He had broken her link.

Alone, the Pythia searched for his thoughts. A lost spirit, blown by the winds of Time in this empty wasteland. The winds that howled like the banshee.

Instead she caught the strata of other thoughts in this place — whisperings of the lost Chronaut crew, all honoured as martyred Heroes at home. Their thoughts were preoccupied with the fate in which they had been sealed.

Riding above that, came the angry compulsion of the brute that ruled this void.

" *The new Now. The old Now, it is purged. The World, it is reshaped!* "

As she listened, she found that there were two voices, or the same voice twined with itself, but they were not in harmony.

" *The Beginning, it starts again*," cried the second against the first. " *From a new Beginning, a new World*."

And then she heard the brute's third voice. The scream of frustrated anger. The cry of something as yet unborn.

She sought to find a direct link with the Doctor, but her thoughts glanced back. There was a mirror across his mind.

A surface that reflected back her probes and concealed the devious complexities beneath. She was certain this unknown voice had dogged her before. It lurked in the shadows of doorways just beyond the torchlight, full of hidden gestures and soft insinuating whispers. She recognized the mockery with which it predicted what she was forbidden to foresee —

her own fate. Somehow this world of monsters was its world.

And in the wind, on the lowest strata of thought, she caught a feeble drone. Sequences of figures and equations were running in a sluggish stream, possibilities and statistics in continuously faltering assessment. This was another mind, barely existing, that she had not encountered before.

Her own thoughts swept the City for its source, but found nothing. It was everywhere, in every shape and form. The place itself was thinking.

The moon overhead, having attained its apogee, had begun its inexorable descent upon the Tower.

28: The Worst Monster

The spherical Universe was contracting visibly. The Phases of the ruined City arched in over the party of guards and prisoners like the roof of a shrinking cavern, a fist that closed around them. The route they took was rising out of the crumbling mass like a rib that led to the cage of the Tower.

Mercury was flooding the streets. The surviving flowers were fading, their sea of tiny lights glimmering out. The devastation was such that the Phases of Now, Past, Present and Future were becoming indistinguishable.

The blood from Pekkary's eye wound was already staunching, but he had to be carried by Reogus. Ace was following on with Chesperl, Amnoni and the older Captain.

No one spoke, but she caught the glances between them that meant they were talking telepathically amongst themselves.

"All right, grumblies, don't talk to me," she muttered to herself. She still had to find the Doctor, but the field of his possible whereabouts

was narrowing by the minute. There were other considerations too — getting the Phazels out of this mess and finding both the missing Shonnzis. Worst of all, the repulsive guard that she was somehow going to become kept pace with her like the mocking shadow of her inescapable doom. Her own death walking with her, just waiting to pounce.

Old Pekkary was walking beside her. "It's just a possibility," he whispered. "It may never occur."

But it was there now. Under its disgusting, implacable insect helmet, she was sure it was grinning. For the first time in her life, she really thought she was going to scream. It was out of control. It was all crushing in. She had the ludicrous idea that the new moon, which was not a real new moon but a full moon, was about to drop out of the sky on top of them. It was certainly descending again and, with no horizon for it to sink behind, there might soon be a very big hole in the world.

They were approaching the Tower gate. The ground around the fortress was shuddering and crumbling as the Phases of the City collided, but the edifice seemed to hover above the timequake. When Ace looked closely into the shadow beneath the Tower, she saw hundreds of iron legs that moved mechanically, rising and falling to compensate for the shifting ground and maintain the structure's stability.

Suddenly Ace knew as clear as anything that the Doctor was there. She knew she had to find him now. The need had suddenly come into her head and superseded everything else.

And then she heard the Doctor's cry. It was coming from the Tower, but it didn't seem distant.

" *Ace! Come and find me! Before it's too late!* "

No one else seemed to have heard. They were too busy talking head to head amongst themselves. She tried to edge to the side of the group, but a guard, her guard with the grinning head, shoved her roughly back. She clutched her arm where the filthy thing had touched her. There was no chance of escape.

The area before the gate was pocked with the Process's slimy footsteps and littered with the rubble of the collapsed stairways.

" *Ace!* " called the Doctor. " *I need you. Hurry!* "

"It's the Doctor," she hissed to Pekkary. "Can't you hear?"

He looked at her, perplexed. "Are you certain?"

"Yes!"

They passed under the arch of the gate and were surrounded by the almost deafening mechanics of the Tower. The guards were driving them towards one of the platforms, when a chain snapped its link and flailed wildly against the lattice of girders.

" *Hurry! Ace!* "

A cascade of sparks showered out as the chain jammed between two bevel wheels. Metal screeched. A third horizontal wheel smashed out of its carriage and slewed across their path. Its cogs tore at the air close to the group.

The guards pushed the Phazels back. Ace saw old Pekkary glance at her for a moment. Then he cried out and fell forward, clutching his arm. The guards moved towards him, chittering angrily.

Ace grabbed her chance and slipped between the girders that bounded the passage. The jammed wheels in this section offered her new platforms and footholds which made her scrambled escape bid easier.

" *Come on, Ace! Further up. I can't hang around here all day*."

His voice was close, but no closer than it had been when she first heard it. Yet it still cut easily through the racket that the Tower mechanics made. It was in her head. A personal summons from the Doctor.

"It's a pity you never thought of talking to me like this before, Professor," she complained aloud as she hoisted herself up through the girder framework. "There's plenty of times when I needed you."

" *Stop complaining and get a move on. We don't have much time*."

She was amongst clattering machinery again. She swung herself on to a high walkway and ran its length, searching for a way up. Behind her, she heard an all-too-familiar squelch and hiss.

The younger Process was approaching along a bisecting walkway. She heard it issuing urgent instructions to its guards. "The prisoner Phazels," it hissed. "Take them to the central platforms. The escaped

Ace Phazel, find her now!"

" *Ace! Hurry up!* "

"Shut up, will you!" she panicked.

The Process gurgled as it arched on to her walkway.

"Ace Phazel. She is here. Stop her!"

Ace ran. One of the girders swung out at her as she passed, snagging the side of her bomber jacket. She ripped the material as she pulled free.

A giant wheel was clanking round at the end of the walkway. Ace jumped for one of its passing platforms and scrambled half on as it carried her higher.

She kicked her legs out and fell exhausted on to the next level of walkways. The need to find the Doctor pressed on her mind again. She forced herself up and trudged warily on.

" *Over here.*"

Through the iron grids, she saw a cocoon.

"Professor." She ran along a girder towards the glittering mass of threads.

" *Of course!* "

She saw the cocoon tremble as she heard his insistent words in her head.

The tips of his fingers were edging out of the mesh.

"Hang on and I'll get you out of there," she said.

She fumbled for her knife and then stopped. There was a second cocoon beyond the first.

"Ace," said his voice from the second. "Is that you?"

She stared between the two.

"Are you there, Ace? Hurry up and get me down. We're going to miss the Beginning."

" *Ace. Don't listen to him. It's that troublemaker Vael.*

Just get me down."

"If it's not Ace, who is it? You have to let me down! The Process has to be stopped!"

Ace didn't need to dither. The answer was as clear in her head as anything. "Stuff off, goik!" she snarled and kicked the second cocoon hard because the Doctor couldn't see.

The cocoon groaned under the attack.

Ace flicked open the knife and started to hack at the filaments of the other mesh.

A claw hand grabbed her arm from behind and the knife clattered away out of reach. The Ace guard stood over her. It shoved its other claw hand into her face.

They grappled together, falling to the floor, rolling over and over on the walkway. Ace, kicking and fighting against her own remorseless and repulsive future. The edge lurched closer. The guard squealed and trilled, driven by the brutal will of its master.

"Ace!" the Doctor kept calling. "What's happening? Are you all right?"

The guard was the stronger by far. It forced Ace into a head-lock and began to drag her upwards.

Ace flailed her arms uselessly, but she could not break the grip. Her hand snatched out for anything to use as a weapon. She caught at one of the badges on her jacket, grasped it and ripped it off.

It was the *Blue Peter* badge awarded for heroic achievement. She rammed the pin into the guard's hand.

The guard screeched and Ace broke free. She grabbed at the insect helmet, her hands crushing the squirming eyes as she wrenched it away.

The future Ace staggered back in the shock of its release. Its face thin and grey, its hair filthy and sparse. Its huge and weary brown eyes blinking as they met Ace's own with a look of imploring terror. It was a terrible, wasted thing.

Ace moved to hug the pitiful creature but it stepped back in fear. It

toppled backwards on the edge of the walkway and fell with a little moan into the depths.

All the energy went out of Ace. She collapsed to the floor, unable to look over the side as she heard the grinding machinery below.

Her future was snatched away. It was fixed. There was no escape. Nowhere to run to. Just sit and wait for it to arrive. She was cold. Unable to think. Yet even now there was a voice whispering in her head.

" *Ace. Let me out.*"

"Leave me alone!" she shrieked and drove that evil insinuating voice out for ever.

She sat on the walkway, slowly rocking back and forth, unable and uncaring.

"I'm sorry, Ace," said the gentlest voice she had ever heard. "I've put you through a lot of cruel things, but no one deserves that. Least of all you."

She made no sound.

"It was a bad dream, Ace. Just a possibility. I'll never let it happen to you. I'll make sure it doesn't."

She sobbed and felt her shoulders begin to tremble. She fought back the tears.

"Time is so cruel," he said. "It's the worst monster of all.

It has the most tricks and it always wins in the end. But I can't fight it alone. I need you, Ace."

The tears came in a flood at last. She howled.

"Stupid little creature," sneered the voice from the first cocoon. "She'll get herself killed making that row."

"Shut up, Vael!" growled the Doctor and his authority was unchallengeable.

Ace sat and cried until she ached.

Finally the Doctor said, "Hush Ace, hush. I cannot ever wipe this

terrible memory away from you. Not with love or hypnosis. You will always remember."

She turned her head towards him. His eye was watching from a gap low in the mesh of the second cocoon. Blue, green, grey. Soft as water, fierce as the sky.

"But I need you Ace. I'm the fool and you're my best friend. You saved me. You kept my memory alive. Until the memory was real again.

She ran her hand across her tearstreaked face and through her straggled and filthy hair. The knife lay beside her on the floor. She reached for it and looked to his eye again.

"Please," he said.

She crawled across the walkway towards him. The brittle filament snapped easily under the blade. The cocoon fizzed apart and he somersaulted to the floor. He caught her in his arms and the tears came again.

"Tell Mum I'm sorry," she choked.

"No need, no need," he said, gently rocking her. "Ace, I swear it will never happen. Trust me. That possibility's a long way away."

"Shonnzi," she gulped. "He helped save you too."

"And we'll save them... somehow."

There was a teeth-jolting clank. The whole Tower shuddered.

"No more tears," he said and fumbled for his handkerchief. He couldn't find it, so he dabbed at her face with his ragged pullover. "You'll get dehydrated and I'll get soaked. We have a Beginning to catch."

She nodded towards the other cocoon. "What about him?"

The Doctor smiled and whispered, "Someone's been keeping an eye on young Vael. He has friends in very high places." Raising his voice, he added, "But his Nanny definitely doesn't know best, although she certainly ought to know better."

Ace showed little sign of interest, so he set to work on the cocoon with the knife. "The trouble is, she shouldn't be allowed to know anything at all."

The cocoon unravelled with a fizz and Vael tumbled out.

"She wouldn't be here without me," he said.

29: Beginning Again

The Phazels crouched on the high platform where they had been left. A series of mechanical devices had carried the palette through the framework of the iron Tower. Finally, it swung down the rim of a vertical wheel and jolted to a halt over a deep well. The hollow shaft at the heart of the fortress was broken by a circle of similar upright wheels. Light from the moon overhead shone down through the gantries. Steam rose from grinding engines in the mechanized Hell below.

Something new was happening. The girders creaked their protest as the engines turned faster and faster.

Across the chasm, the Opposite wheel was lowering a second platform to their level. On it stood the group of guards. Motionless and implacable. Each carrying another insect helmet for the recruitment of its own younger self.

The other wheels began to turn, each lowering their own platforms out over the well. The new palettes stopped level with the first, overlapping their neighbours, until a wide floor area was formed over the abyss like the plug of a volcano.

Guards and Phazels faced each other across the area.

Rust-red and dust-grey pawns in some diabolical chess game. Or so the Doctor thought as he watched from the walkway high on the side of the well. He pulled Ace and Vael back into the shadows as the last wheel carried its platform down into the arena.

On the palette stood the younger Process. The repulsive leech leaned its head vulturelike over the edge to view its victims. Beside it was another figure — the guard who had been Shonnzi, with the Pilot who would be Shonnzi slumped over one shoulder.

All Time was being swept away. Everything the Doctor valued — his friends and his freedom — was being crushed.

The past rose in phantom form to mock him. The future, like the great

Gate of legend, slammed in his face. Nothing went right any more. His own process was still not complete. He was still only *Will be* the Doctor, or *May be* or *Perhaps*. Just another possibility. Only the iron mountain was stable in the crumbling world of his SARDIT/TARDIS, and that was sustained by the tenuous power leeched by the Process from its Phazel slaves. The final chance, which he recognized but did not understand, was descending from the sky upon them all. Viewed objectively, it could be the most momentous impact event since Adric hit Mexico. He reached out to reassure himself that Ace was still there. She squeezed his hand.

Across the well on another walkway stood a silhouetted figure. Its black cloak billowed about it, but there was no wind. Its invisible eyes transfixed the Doctor. His ship awaited its release. So do I, he thought. That was the trouble with machines —however bio-complex they were, they always stated the obvious. The endless nagging threat in his head was quite enough to be going on with. Just don't howl, he thought. His nerves couldn't stand it.

He measured out a length of filament cut from the cocoon and hitched it round a girder. "You were in the Brownies, Ace," he said, raising his voice above the head of steam. "What did they teach you about knots?"

The Process's platform had reached the main level. The creature lurched off, footmouth over footmouth, between the ranks of its subjects.

"There is only Now," it declared. "The disruption, the alternatives, they will cease."

The guard Shonnzi deposited its burden on to the trembling floor. The kid aimed a well-aimed kick at its captor and pulled free, scrambling for shelter into Amnoni's arms.

A throaty gurgle, which could have been laughter, emanated from the Process. "The recruitment," it croaked.

"Complete it."

The guards, each carrying a new insect-helmet, advanced on their victims.

"Stand back," warned the younger Pekkary. He walked unsteadily forward, fighting back the pain in his eye. "We are still a crew. We have possibilities of our own to fulfil."

The huge head swung to look at him. "Not any more. All possibilities, they are mine.

Reogus stepped up beside his Captain. "Where's my future, you filthy object? Have you bungled that as well?"

"The new Now, it is decreed already." The monster turned to its guards. "Take them all!"

The Phazels stood their ground. A telepathic nod of readiness. With one cry, the youngest and oldest Pekkarys launched themselves at the Guard Captain. Amnoni abandoned her decorum and barrelled into her older self.

Chesperl hurtled at her counterpart. Reogus eagerly grabbed the guard that had once been Vael.

With a scream of hatred, the little Pilot threw himself at the Shonnzi guard. The creature, nearly twice his size, caught the child easily. It swung him down to the floor and began to force a helmet over his head.

"No!" yelled Ace from the walkway high above.

Somewhere in the frame of the Tower, the bells attempted their broken chimes.

"That's enough!" The Doctor's voice echoed out its order. "How dare you brawl in my TARDIS!"

The guards and Phazels stopped the attack where they stood. The Process craned its head upwards at the intruder.

He was dangling high above them like a trapeze artist.

He clung to the unwound filament, his foot resting on a Brown Owl's Triple Reefer that Ace had knotted into the strand for him.

"Well, the gang's all here," he said. "Excuse me for gatecrashing your party, Process, but I thought you'd forgotten to invite me. And I did provide the venue, after all."

The Process hissed angrily. Steam jetted from the gantries. Iron clanked as the Tower's structure began to move.

The Doctor twirled gracefully on his filament. "You see, I want a little chat about your future."

The monster tried to squint with its circle of eyes, but evolution had not allowed for such a function. The Doctor was a spindly black shape among the criss-cross of girders, beneath the ever-growing moon. It was all moving.

"Business, it is none of yours!" cried the brute. "You know nothing of me!"

"I know Processes take Time," he called, "And that makes you a thief."

"The World, it is mine, I created it! Now. There will only be Now!"

"Oh well, if you only want *Now*, you're welcome to it."

The Doctor let himself slide further down the filament until he reached another of Ace's knots. He left a smear of blood behind him. The cord was cutting savagely into his hands.

"You know what *Now* means, don't you?" he sneered.

"For pitiful creatures like you, *Now* doesn't even reach to the end of your snout!" He allowed his venom a free rein. He had never loathed a creature more than this, or taken its struggle for survival in the Darwinian universe so personally.

It was him or it. "In a frozen *Now*, Processes go nowhere!

Now is a petty little world that gets smaller by the minute. It's where you belong, Process! I'll swap you *Now* for my TARDIS."

The Process swung its head from side to side. "The Doctor! Bring him down! No more disruptions. Everything is planned!"

The Doctor slid down the filament to the floor and squared up to his monstrous rival. He pointed up through the gantries with a bloody finger. "Then what is that?"

"An omen. It proclaims the new Now. The Process's new Now."

The Doctor blew a loud raspberry. "You're a has-been, Process. A no-hoper. You've been outmanoeuvred by someone older and wiser than you. That moon goes beyond your new *Now*."

He looked up. A fine red dust was falling through the clouds of steam. Metal screeched and clanked as the girder sections of the Tower pulled apart. The massive structure was opening like an iron flower to receive the descending moon.

"That is the new Beginning," cried the Doctor. "It was invoked by your future. The older Process you could have become, before you threw away that possibility. That Process is dead and now I shall step into its shoes and begin again.

"Professor," said an urgent voice at his shoulder. He turned and saw that Ace had somehow found a way down to join him.

"Not now, Ace. I have my ship to reconstruct."

"But Doctor, there's something I didn't tell you..."

There was a blood-freezing wail from the gantries above. The Banshee Circuit was howling at the moon.

A violent hiss came from the side of the well. Out of an opening slithered the battered shape of the older Process.

"My new Beginning," it croaked. "My new Now." It began to raise itself painfully on to one footmouth, but its body was torn and still oozing black blood.

"The Beginning, it is mine," called the younger Process.

"You are dead! Your world has failed!"

"And the failure, you are part of it! This world, it shall be swept away in my new Beginning!"

The Doctor glanced up at the descending moon. It was close. The two Processes were hissing at each other like angry kettles. They could carry on like this until they boiled dry.

"The old regime is ended," he called to the younger monster.

It turned on him angrily. "The new regime of Now, I shall create it!"

"But then you'll become the old regime and there'll be another new young Process to overthrow you."

The older Process struggled closer to its younger self.

"Trapped," it gloated. "My Beginning, it is the only way!"

The younger creature spat as it reared up. With a shriek, it fell upon the older Process. Its lamprey teeth, both mouths, fixed into the flanks of its victim.

Ace turned away, repulsed. She covered her ears against the terrible screams of the older creature.

"And these two want to be Gods," observed the Doctor.

"They're pitiful," interrupted a voice.

He shuddered. Vael was standing beside him.

" *Look at the moon*," thought Chesperl. " *So cold, like a ghost*."

Shadows shifted across the great surface.

Young Pekkary gripped Reogus's arm. " *It's the Scaphe!*

We've found it! "

The flanks of the Tower were closing around the sinking globe like anchor gantries on the space docks of Gallifrey.

Vael cowered under the stare of the baleful light. " *It is her eye!* " he thought angrily.

" *It's just a moon*," thought Amnoni. " *Like any other moon*."

The little Pilot had struggled free of the Shonnzi guard.

He backed away from the struggling Processes and stared up at the descending globe. "Silly grumblies," he said. "It's a great big egg. Anyone can see that!"

The Doctor winced. The moon had looked to him like a roundel in the walls of his lost TARDIS. It took the child Shonnzi, his protégé, to see things that were lost on the fuddled brains of adults. Inside the shell of the vast globe, something was moving. The shadow writhed inside its egg.

In the Cat's Cradle, where Time was tangled, the tyrant despot Process had summoned its own Beginning. The monster was supervising its own birth.

It couldn't be allowed.

The younger Process arched up from its hideous crime.

Black blood slobbered on its footmouth. "The Future, it is corrected! Now, there is only Now!"

"Wrong again, Process," called the Doctor. He nodded up at the mottled egg. Cracks were appearing in the shell.

"Your own Beginning is about to correct you!"

The Process emitted a gurgling shriek of frustration. "My guards. Their minds sustain the World. They can destroy you."

The scattered guards turned in one movement towards him. A wave of the Process's hatred, amplified through their telepathy, bowled the Doctor off his feet. He scrambled for cover, but found himself lifted into the air. Higher and higher he rose, flailing on a crest of malice. His ship was slipping away from him. He heard the clanking bells and the howl of the Banshee. The shell of the egg was closer and closer. It was splitting across. He didn't know what he was saying or how to stop it. No one had told him.

"Ace!" he choked. "Use all available resources!"

The other Phazels were backing off in terror. Ace watched the Doctor spin helplessly in the air high overhead. She saw the massive moonshell splitting open. Suddenly the dimensions were changing. The walls were shrinking. She saw the bulging TARDIS doors split open as the newborn Process emerged.

"It's the Beginning again, Professor," she called. "I've seen it before!"

She ran across the floor of the Tower and grabbed at the filament, pulling it desperately towards him.

The Beginning. This is what he was seeking. A fresh page or canvas.

"Guards! Phazels!" he cried, his voice cracking under their onslaught. "Chronauts, listen to me! This is the Beginning. You are free people. You are reborn. The Process has no power over you yet!"

He dipped in the air as he felt their will falter. Close above him, he glimpsed slimy hide through the cracks in the shell. Below him, the Process gurgled with murderous rage.

"You have a choice," persisted the Doctor. "Reject the Process's cruel slavery and find your homes again!

Remember Gallifrey!"

He heard a telepathic sigh of release.

The power snapped and he plunged towards the floor.

He snatched at the filament pulled by Ace and swung on it, his hands bleeding again.

On the floor below, the Process shrieked. Its guards were pulling off their lifeless helmets. They swayed uneasily, stunned by their release.

A cascade of broken shell fell from the egg. The new Process squealed as it began to force its way out.

Vael watched both Ace and the Pilot run towards the little runt Shonnzi and hug him.

When Vael saw himself, his own future, released and stumbling towards him, he gave a cold laugh. And his future laughed too. Then a bolt of pain knifed into their brains. It was the eye that lived with him again. The insane old woman who thought he was her princeling. He would reject her and still have the power she promised. He was an Individual.

A boom like thunder. The whole Tower jolted. The shrinking world beyond had reached the bounds of the fortress.

"Chronauts," called the Doctor from above. "I need your power now! I claim my TARDIS back!"

They were reunited at last. The minds of the Gallifreyans bonded in one thought — to restore the power of their deliverer.

The bells of the Tower rang out. And at last, the chime was complete. The chimes of the Jibert Cathcode Troisième in the TARDIS console room. The figure dangling on the filament was bathed in a new glow of reassurance. *May be* became a certainty. *Will be* became now. The shrinking grids of the Tower were filling slowly in. Restoration was taking form.

"It's all right," he called as the filament gently descended. "I'm back. I am the Doctor!"

The Process crouched beneath him, condensing its length like a coiled spring. It leapt up, its jaws snapping at his legs. He swung wildly on the filament to avoid it.

"The World, it is mine!" it shrieked and leapt again.

Overhead, the lowering ceiling of moonshell broke open completely. The first head of the embryo Process, dripping mucus, forced itself out and squealed its claim of inheritance.

The younger Vael ran forward. "No! It's mine! Mine by right!" He held up something that glinted in his hand. It was the TARDIS key. "You left it in the Phrontisterie door." He grinned. "Important, is it?" His head ticked wildly as if a power was pressing on his mind.

"Give me that!" demanded Ace. "You're the last person who's having that!" She ran angrily at him, but he turned, a flood of burning anger in his eyes.

"Ace!" cried the older Pekkary. He knocked her sideways and caught the blast of Vael's hatred full on.

Flames burst out inside his coat. He crumbled in smoking ashes to the floor.

Ace screamed.

The monsters bellowed.

Vael's eyes darted wildly. "The ship is mine!" he said with an intense quietness. The spindly form of his future came to join him.

"You're beside yourself with fear, Vael. Out of control!"

goaded the Doctor. He clung to the filament for his life, swinging dangerously close to the open maw of the Process below.

Above him, the newborn monstrosity squirmed voraciously down.

"You'll never be an Individual, Nanny's boy!" he added.

"Neither you nor that archaic old battleaxe of a Pythia belong in my ship! So go now!"

The anger blazed up through both Vaels.

The Process gave one final leap. Its jaws fastened to the Doctor's leg. It dragged him down, screaming. The bolt of Vael's burning fury seared off target into the new monster above.

The egg and its creature exploded into a cataract of fire.

The Process spat out its victim and flung up its head in a wail of

despair. Burning shell and flesh rained down. Its Past was destroyed. Its Now ceased. It vapoured away into nothing.

" *Vael, my successor!* " ranted the voice in his mind. " *The future. I must know it. Bring me this ship!* "

He twisted and clasped his head. "No! I'm an Individual!

It's mine! I'm the future. Not you!" His future self watched him in bewilderment.

Across the floor lay the Doctor, bewildered and vulnerable, his leg twisted. Ace crouched, her arms around him. Shonnzi stood beside them.

"Got you all together," Vael growled and ran at them with his burning eyes.

A flash of silver.

The cat ran out of nowhere and leapt at Vael with a vicious yowl. Its claws sank into his back. He reeled sideways, beating at the impossible creature in agony.

" *Obey me, Vael! You are mine!* " cried the Pythia.

"Never!" he railed. "Get out! Get out of my head for ever!"

In the blind rage he would never master, he turned his burning fury on the eye in his own mind.

Ace crouched down, burying her face in the Doctor's jumper.

The Doctor observed Vael's final immolation in dispassionate silence. Beside him, the Vael guard faded too, vanishing into the curling, greasy smoke.

"Much too Grand Guignol," the Doctor said after a while.

"A mind like Vael's only occurs once in a millennium. In the wrong head, it can be the deadliest weapon of all."

He rose on his painful leg and gently sifted the blackened TARDIS key out of the ashes.

"Don't you ever care?" said Ace, pushing away her tears.

"I'm a Doctor. Call it professional detachment."

She shook her head in indulgent despair and took his hand. It was trembling.

30: The Children of Rassilon

The periodic subdivision of archaic Gallifreyan history known as the Old Time is an area of much debate. The Scribe Quartinian theorizes that the Age of the Pythias should be divided into two sections: the Time of Empire, which then decayed terminally through the Time of Chaos.

One extreme had to be reached, its nadir plumbed, before a new order could assert itself. Once the darkness was complete, only Rassilon could light the new lamp, but the flame would gutter dangerously for a long time.

from Rassilon the God

Prydonian Cardinal Borusa.

A tongue of flame leapt up from the abyss and touched her cage.

There was a gasp from the assembly of lords and councillors in the cavern, but the Pythia was unscathed.

Only in her mind were there real flames. Vael had burned away the cords that she had woven. The threads that united them — that bound him to her. The anger that compelled him had finally consumed him.

How wasteful. Now she was alone.

Their eyes were all on her. One name, they thought.

That was all they wanted. A tiny boon so that their teetering Empire would go on forever.

She gave a deep groan. She owed them nothing. The world tasted of dust. She felt her age for the first time. Her hands were only mottled skin stretched across brittle bone.

Her world was corrupting. The people squirmed like maggots on the filthy accumulation of Gallifrey's past.

The Eye of the Sphinx began to weep. The great tears of the Cat rolled down the Pythia's gilded face. It wept for the age that passed with the coming of the future. The Pythia's remaining eye stayed dry as ice.

"My successor! Where is he?" she cried. "Where?"

Figures scurried in alarm below. She heard drums beating outside and the distant fizz of Council Police guns.

Handstrong stood by the stair with his ceremonial sword raised. There was the crash of overturned icons in the Temple above.

The future had rejected her, now she would take her revenge upon its snub.

" *Sisters. My sisters*," she called to them alone. " *This world is doomed. I curse it. As I die, so shall it wither. Go now my followers, and flee this world. Seek out the fire fountains of Karn. There you shall endure for ever. The gods shall protect you in their cupped hands*."

She gripped the weave of her basket and cried aloud,

"Let the world hear my curse. I am Gallifrey, sky and rock, flame and flood, womb and bone. When I am no more, the world shall be barren and empty of new life. It will live a slow ageless death and come to nothing in its own dust. I have spoken these words. Let them be fulfilled."

From her robe she pulled an ancient sacrificial blade.

She reached up and cut the umbilical rope that held the basket. It plunged into the abyss and there was silence.

Lord Dowtroyal gathered his papers and left the Temple.

"But she gave no name, my lord," called one of his secretaries, scampering to keep apace. "There is no successor."

"She said, 'He'," proclaimed his lordship.

"A man, my lord? Surely not."

"Did she speak any other name? *He* will suffice. She foresees the future, but who says it has to be propitious for her? The Empire's just been spared a revolution."

The secretary nearly dropped his document files. "But you cannot

mean..."

"We can all hazard a guess as to *His* identity. We have the successor from the crone's own lips! *He!* "

He burst into a great rolling laugh as he picked his way through the riot debris in the snowy courtyard. The place was deserted, but the frosty air was thick with rumour.

The driver was waiting at the gate with the covered skimmersledge. Dowtroyal snapped his fingers as he heaved himself inside. Another figure leant back in a mound of cushions.

"Right into our hands," blustered Dowtroyal. "Just as was predicted! She's dead, of course."

"I hate predictions," said the other gloomily.

Dowtroyal looked startled. He turned to the driver.

"Thrift, whatever your name is, back to the Academia now.

The new Pythia won't want to be kept waiting!"

He burst into another fit of laughter as the sledge pulled away. The merriment echoed up through the walls of the silent City. Finally it was drowned by a cry — the anguished shriek of a mother faced with the limp form of her stillborn child.

It had begun to snow hard.

The Doctor looked like a kid at Christmas, Ace decided. He stood at the heart of a dimensional kaleidoscope, phantoms of walls shifting around and through him like smoke. The iron grid of the Tower was block-transferring in. He nodded in acknowledgement as ghosts of familiar objects drifted past.

Clothes, furniture, a bicycle, books, a hatstand, the bicycle again — less battered. The old reality was slotting back together. The TARDIS. No pins, no glue required.

The young Chronaut crew was huddled in a ring of reunion close by. The older ones, the released guards, were scattered, watching, ignored by their younger selves.

"What happens now?" said Shonnzi.

"I think you get your ship back," said Ace, but she didn't look at him.

"Oh."

"You'll be pushing off then. Back home," she went on.

"Have you got a family?" She turned towards him, but he looked away.

"I suppose so. There's always the grumblies."

There was a pause while they dodged the part of the portrait of "The Arnolfini Marriage" that drifted through between them.

Ace nodded towards it with a half-smile. "It's the Doctor's," she said. "He picks up the weirdest stuff and carts it everywhere with him."

"It's from the Flemish school," said Shonnzi. "By Jan van Eyck, what's left of it. There was an accident with the deletion chimper. The TARDIS told me."

"Come with us," she said.

His face dropped. "I... can't, Ace," he answered quietly.

"There's no problem. The others can cope without you.

And there's plenty of room in the TARDIS."

"It's not that easy."

"Yes, it is. I'll fix it with the Doctor." She caught a painful look in his eyes, but he kept moving his head away. She guessed what it meant. "Commitments," she exploded. "Why do people always have commitments?"

"Sorry."

"So what's the matter?" She tried to take his arm, but he pulled that away too. "That's it. Misery, misery, misery. If you don't want to come, just say so."

"It's not that!" There was despair in his voice that bordered on anger.

"Then why?" She was about to grab him and kiss him hard. Instead, she pulled back. "Just wait... I'll talk to the Doctor."

"Ace."

He reached for her, but she walked away instead.

The Doctor scrutinized a panel of instruments that was drifting past. He was sure it had nothing to do with the TARDIS.

"The chrono-telemeter," called the older Pekkary, "from their Scaphe."

The Doctor nodded slowly and hobbled across to the Captain. "It's all coming together then. The redirecting of the artron power was the kick start it needed. Thank you, Pekkary."

"A restoration," agreed Pekkary. He observed the huddle of young Chronauts a little way off.

In the golden light, Reogus was lifting the young Pilot on to his shoulders. "Now that the Menti Celesti favour us again, we should make an offering of thanks."

The other Chronauts were eager to agree. Only their young Captain Pekkary, his face cruelly scarred, turned away with a look of anger.

"Oracular vernacular," muttered the older Pekkary. "Next they'll be making blood sacrifices."

The Doctor eyed the Captain warily. He still had questions that badgered his thoughts. But they had to be worded with extreme care. "You don't believe in all that?" he asked.

Pekkary shrugged. "I go along with it. It's instilled in us from birth."

"But you really believe in a new order of Reason instead?"

"I don't believe in the Pythia's regime of superimposed superstition. Is there ever a new order, Doctor? You're from the future. You tell me."

"My knowledge of ancient history is fragmentary, Pekkary. My memories get a bit confused."

"But the Time experiments are successful?"

"Eventually. After many changes."

"And we become... Time Lords?"

The Doctor sighed deeply. "Contact with the Past is forbidden. But I

can talk to you, Pekkary. I think you understand why."

The answer was perfunctory. " *My* crew are just redundant possibilities now. Dead ends on a defunct timeline." He nodded to the group of young Chronauts.

"That's the real future starting over there."

"I'm sorry, Pekkary. Your ordeals were not wasted.

We're rid of the Process for good."

Pekkary glanced across to the scattered members of his own crew as they waited. "We all hear you, Doctor. There are no recriminations. We die for the others to live and return home."

The slow coagulation of dimensions intensified around them. The air hummed with power. The Doctor felt his own assurance grow, but his chances were running out.

"Not long," said Pekkary and he was suddenly in earnest. "Tell me what happens in the future, Doctor?"

The Doctor sniffed. "It's not all bouquets. There are a multitude of scientific triumphs, but also great wars. The telepathy dwindles. Death is all but abolished. The men get taller, or is it the women shorter? But you were right, Pekkary. Rassilon and his followers come to power — even if there are fearsome obstacles to surmount and a terrible price to pay. It's all in the legends."

It was useless to ask his questions of Pekkary. The Captain and his crew should come to an end reassured —

that was far more important. Yet the Doctor might never have another chance. There were questions he should have asked the Sisterhood on Karn had he thought of it, or that wretched sorceress Peinforte. But they were pale shadows of their Pythian forebears.

"Tell me who you are," said Pekkary.

"Ah." The Doctor managed a smile. "I'm a Doctor, that's all. An observer with a degree in pantopragmatics and a nasty suspicious mind." He ducked a low-flying carpet that nearly took his hat off. There was no doubt now that the area was closing in on preset parameters and interfaces. The ghost walls were cratered with roundels.

The young Chronaut crew had already vanished in the miasma. "Pekkary," the Doctor said, "tell me about Rassilon and his followers.

"Professor? I want to talk to you."

The Doctor froze. "Not now, Ace," he said without looking at her.

"Captain," she said. "If the Doctor agrees, would you release Shonnzi from your crew?"

Pekkary glanced in confusion at the Doctor.

"Ace!" The Doctor had known this would be trouble. His twin hearts sank. Human emotions were so frail. Hadn't she been through enough already?

"Oh, come on, Professor. Shonnzi's clamming up about it, but I know he'd jump if he had the chance. I mean you virtually chose him anyway."

"The TARDIS chose him," said the Doctor.

"Same difference, isn't it?" she said knowingly. "And I want him to come, Professor. Really I do."

"But I have business plans," the Doctor floundered. "It'll mean more arguments, more trouble, less room." He knew he was fighting a losing baffle. Her eyes were wide with determination. "I can't rescue two people as thoroughly as one!"

"I'll watch his back as well as yours. Trust me."

The Doctor scowled. "And you trust me too much, Ace."

"So?" she said.

He looked in despair at Pekkary.

"I'm sorry, Ace," said the Captain. "Pilot Shonnzi cannot be released from my crew. We need his guidance to get us home to Gallifrey. We cannot travel without him."

The Doctor gave a nod of undying gratitude to the Captain.

Ace turned away, crestfallen. "Yeah. Sorry. It was just an idea."

"It was a fine idea, Ace," the Doctor said. "I'm too protective. I don't

allow myself many true friends."

"You couldn't afford to pay the danger money," she said with forced bravery.

The area had shrunk to the size of the console room.

Shonnzi was standing in the TARDIS outer doorway with the other older Chronauts. The shapes of another ship's control area were visible beyond the door, but still in the bounds of the police box.

Pekkary gave Shonnzi a fatherly nudge forward.

"Go on then, Ace," Shonnzi said. "Off you go."

"Idiot," she said tearfully. "Just drive carefully, okay?"

The Doctor watched her run to hug Shonnzi. He felt a jolt in his stomach as if he was riding a switchback. Instead, Ace's arms were full of the skinny, mucky, ginger-haired urchin. She was startled and then cradled him tight. "Go on, gingerscruff," she sobbed. "Love to your mum and dad and your grumblies."

"Love you," said the kid and pulled away.

"Time," muttered the Doctor, "you are the cruellest monster of all."

The older Pekkary was gone. His crew had ceased. The Chronauts by the door were now the young crew. "Goodbye, Doctor," they called. "Goodbye, Ace."

"All of you," said the Doctor, "when you get home, cherish the children. They are more precious than you will ever know. Goodbye."

The doors closed. In the air, the Doctor caught the words " *We travel"* . He slipped his arm around Ace's shoulder and hugged her tight. "They'll soon be home," he said. "In fact they were home millennia ago."

He turned her and pointed at a shape that was growing steadily at the centre of the floor. It was an angular mushroom, and as it grew, it sprouted a rash of dials and instruments across its surface. A glass column, filled with flickering lights like stars, rose and fell at its crown.

"And this is our home," said Ace, her voice half-choked with relief. "Welcome back, Doctor."

He could hear a slowly rising whine of returning power.

A tingle of anticipation fizzed in him. He leaned forward and ran a finger across the still-growing console panels.

With an almighty *whump!* the furniture and fittings arrived. Not returned to their rightful places as if nothing had happened, but dropped instantly out of nowhere in a random and chaotic spillage. The TARDIS resembled more than ever the aftermath of an earthquake in a junkyard.

"Home. No place like it," said the Doctor, and he felt a certain wildness coming into his eyes with the rising power.

"That's what I need. Answers about home."

31: Bookends

The Scribe Quartinian wrote:

The return against all odds of the missing Chronoscaphe was interpreted by the people as the one good omen that presaged Rassilon's assumption of power.

Otherwise, the Pythia's terrible death-curse took instant effect. Babies died in their mothers' wombs. From that day on, no child was ever born on Gallifrey again.

Rassilon played with the onion doll while he waited. It was a ridiculous object. With a twist of the hand, the toy could be split into two hemispheres to reveal another patterned sphere nestling inside — but the onion inside was bigger than the first. Impossible! And inside that onion was another onion, bigger still.

Rassilon's desk was already littered with coloured onion shells. Soon his office would be impossible to get into.

Lord Dowtroyal walked in unannounced. His red-heeled boots left patches of melting snow on the floor. He had come from another funeral. "How's the toe?" he said grimly.

"Painful as usual." Rassilon pushed away the latest onion section. "There must be a simple solution to this wretched thing."

Dowtroyal looked grave. "I was erm . . . sorry to hear of your loss," he

said.

"It would have been a girl," Rassilon said. "Her mother has taken it badly. Her mother? What am I talking about?

She'll never be a mother now." He fiddled with the onion shells. "It's strange. In a way it brings us even closer to the people — they know that we suffer too."

Dowtroyal weighed one of the onion shells in his hand.

"The Council are preparing to offer you a new crown."

"Again?" interrupted a voice by the ornamental stove in the corner. "Isn't twice enough?"

Dowtroyal glowered into the shadows. "I didn't see you sitting there," he muttered disdainfully.

Rassilon was shaking his head. "I cannot take ultimate responsibility. I will only share leadership." He unscrewed the latest onion and found yet another inside — it was bigger than ever.

There was a polite cough. Thrift was standing in the doorway. "Apologies meyopapa but the new Hero is waiting to see you."

"Must I see him?" Rassilon complained. "Can't this wait?"

"No," said the other Councillor beside the fire.

Thrift went out.

"Why me?" demanded Rassilon. "Why do the people see me as their deliverer?"

The other leaned forward to the samovar and helped himself to another glass of tea. "Because you're one of them. You said it yourself."

"Which is more than can be said for you," muttered Dowtroyal. He looked up as the Young Hero entered the room.

"Quennesander Olyesti Pekkary. Come in, please," said Rassilon. "The return of your ship has given us all the greatest pleasure in this desperate time."

"Thank you, uncle," said Pekkary.

He wore the official uniform of one who has been honoured. The weal of a cruel scar across his face was not hidden. He looked older than his years. One eye was a blank orb. He sat down in Lord Dowtroyal's proffered chair.

Rassilon handed Pekkary a glass of tea. "We have all read your report," he said. "Extraordinary. I should have guessed that the Pythia would have an agent on board as well."

They talked long through the evening, going over Pekkary's report in detail. When food came, Pekkary ate little. He had developed an addiction for plain dry biscuits and found most other food unpalatable.

Time and again, he returned excitedly to the subject of the ship that was infinitely variable in form, and smaller on the outside than in. His eyes grew wilder.

"And it was from Gallifrey. From the stolen future. So, you see, the Time experiments will work. One day we shall travel in ships like that."

Dowtroyal burst into sudden laughter. "And this other pilot, this Doctor, he sounds a strange fellow, whatever his powers."

The other stared coldly from his chair. "Is that how we shall be in the future? Strange and small?" He caught Rassilon's wounded reaction and added quickly, "Present company excepted, of course."

"I should have spoken to the Doctor further," insisted Pekkary. "I would have done in the future. But his ship was still a marvel. It travelled by artron power, not by its crew's will."

Rassilon smiled indulgently. "We have seen through a window. It is a possibility we must take into consideration."

Pekkary was almost fanatical. "But there's work to do.

We've already started. One day we'll be the Lords of Time!"

"There are far graver matters pressing," said Rassilon.

"The Time programme is suspended until further notice."

"But . . . uncle."

Rassilon's eye's blazed. "We can't pour treazants into a bottomless

vortex, not when our people face extinction through a witch's curse! The Time programme is suspended!"

He turned away, shaking.

Pekkary came to attention. "My nurse is waiting," he said flatly. "Thank you. The hospital is very comfortable." He bowed and walked to the door, but a hand touched his shoulder.

"Go and see Omega at the science faculty," said the other. "I'll arrange it. He'll be interested in what you have to say."

Pekkary left silently. After a moment, Dowtroyal made his excuses and departed for another funeral.

"That was cruel," said Rassilon.

"But necessary," said the other. "Poor unhappy fellow."

Rassilon glared up at him. "Don't you have a family?

Don't you care about the future?"

"Your future . . . or mine?" He smiled grimly, his every movement radiated dark and calculated power. "Isn't the present enough to be going on with?" He picked up the onion kernel. "An amusing toy. It can go on for ever. Always another mystery inside the first."

Rassilon snatched up two of the half-shells. "Bigger on the inside. But if you invert the process, the original fits neatly inside the second and so on and on. Like so." He completed the trick.

"That's not what I meant."

"But I'm right, aren't I?" said Rassilon. He turned for confirmation, but the other, as usual, was nowhere to be seen.

Quartinian continues:

There are many conflicting accounts of Rassilon's rise.

In one sense, Gallifrey without the Pythia was a far from barren world. Great advances are often born in moments of direst need. As a new Ice Age set in, Rassilon faced the imminent extinction of the Gallifreyan race. Colony worlds throughout the Empire were demanding their independence.

Sanctions and wars threatened to dissolve the Empire completely.

New solutions had to be implemented drastically fast.

Out of this turmoil grew the sapling of the new order. The need to survive created the concept of rationalized families, born through their own genetic looms, that would stabilize the decimated population. Thus were founded the Great Houses of Gallifrey that we know today.

New laws and trade pacts were created. Later came the triumphs of regeneration and, at last, Time Travel. Thus Rassilon mocked the Pythia's curse and single-handedly inspired the legend and folklore that is still the root of our society and power.

Isn't it dark

Isn't it cold

Seek out the future

Before you get old

Once there were children

This is their doom

Now all the people

Are born from the loom

Mid-Gallifreyan Nursery Versery.

"Begat . . . Begat . . . Begat!" complained the Doctor.

"Useless!" He pulled angrily at the tickertape that spewed from the dusty TARDIS console.

Ace watched him through the tangle of furniture and knickknacks that filled the control room. She was getting frightened. The light flickered. The whine of growing power was grating her nerves.

"Professor," she called.

"Families! No one's had real families since . . ." He was trying to juggle another magnetic card into the console.

Families? thought Ace. She suddenly remembered a sliver of a borrowed dream when she had glimpsed what she thought was his family. Cousins and more cousins in a distant mountainous country.

No mothers or fathers — just cousins. But in the TARDIS library, there was a birthday card, old and yellowing, and on it in willowy writing was *Happy Birthday Grandfather*.

"I must know what happened!" he snapped feverishly.

"Where?"

"On Gallifrey. To the Pythia. I can't remember what happened at the end of the Old Time."

"Who's the Pythia? There's no need to get so worked up."

"It should be here on the records." He ignored the whine of piling energy and squinted at the tape. "The Intuitive Revelation. The sacrifice of Omega. No, no, before all that!"

"Doctor? Turn the power down," she called, starting to clamber over the furniture. "It sounds well out of order. And so do you."

"Aha!" he cried, pulling eagerly at the latest tape. "This is it! 'Then the Pythia cried a great cry and laid her curse upon the world. But the followers of Rassilon rose up and cast her into the abyss. The last of the Pythias perished and her followers fled Gallifrey. Thus Rassilon came to power.

But henceforth the world was barren.'"

The Doctor paused in astonishment. He pulled angrily at the tape. "Is that all? Who wrote this stuff?"

The blare of power seethed higher. He yanked out the card and read the inscription. "Typical! The Authorised Version! The legendary Whitewash of Rassilon! Perpetuated by Borusa and Quartinian's interminable, fawning idolatry.

No wonder I always slept through history lessons!" He turned to Ace with a look of angry despair. "Now I'm never going to know what really happened!"

"Does it matter?" she shouted above the din. "You've got the TARDIS back. Just cut the turbos, will you?"

The whole ship juddered with the surging power. Ace felt nauseous. She could smell burning. She reached for the controls, but his hand slapped her away.

"My TARDIS," he growled. A new, cold determination was in his eyes. "You're right, Ace. Of course you are. Now we've seen what it can do. I never realized its potential before. There's nothing my ship can't be. It's not just a passe-partout to the universe. The possibilities are infinite!

Who cares about the world outside? We can create our own in here!"

"No, Professor!" she shouted, grasping his arms. "That was in crisis!" The power was screaming in her head. It reflected in his eyes. She thought he would burn her.

"Anything we like, Ace. Just name it. Anything! We can make the stars sing. Infinite beauty, infinite mystery. And infinite power in the Process! All here in my TARDIS! We never need go out again!"

Ace hit the Doctor across the face.

There was an extraordinary flash of light.

The lamp that burns on the roof of the police box that spins in the void, explodes like a safety valve.

The power dwindled and settled into a steady familiar hum.

The Doctor, his hat battered, his jumper in shreds, clung to the side of the console. His breath was coming in short gasps. "I shall never know now. I shall never know," he whispered. He clasped his leg and groaned. He was shivering.

Ace fished his discarded jacket out of the jumbled furniture and draped it gently round his shoulders.

"I'm just a bookend," he said faintly, "holding up one end of the universe. And I can't see what's happening at the other end of the shelf."

"It's all right, Professor," she said. "It's all over now."

"Ace?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"Thank you, Ace. He looked completely stunned by his ordeal. "We'd been to one extreme. We had to go to the other to balance it out."

"Yeah. All right." She hugged him and felt him relax a little. "Will the

ship be okay now?"

"It'll take time to restore completely, but it's holding together just."

"No more banshees or cats?"

"Not now. They only appear in the direst need, when even the cloister bell doesn't work."

"I wondered what'd happened to that." She looked at the chaos surrounding them. "It'll take months to clean up. Do you really need all this stuff?"

He still clung to the console. "There are things I can't get into my pockets." He reached towards the flight co-ordinate keyboard.

"Professor, shouldn't we wait before we go bombing off somewhere?"

"I have business to deal with."

She grimaced. "Are you sure it's all right?"

"No, of course not."

"Where are we going?"

"Separate ways.

"What? You're not going off and leaving me?"

"Ace," he said, keying in co-ordinates, "managing everything on my own can get very exhausting. How much do you know about Persian carpets?"

"They make lousy bridges," she said wearily. "Just tell me after I've had a bath."

He frowned at something at the base of the console and crouched awkwardly. A little cluster of the light flowers was growing there. He plucked one of the blooms. "It'll be all right, Ace. Trust me."

She smiled weakly as he edged the flower behind her ear and snubbed her nose. "I do, Professor. That's where the trouble always starts."

In a corner, behind a mound of tangled bric-a-brac, the silver cat stopped washing itself and stared round with darting predatory eyes.

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